

Benzodiazepines (“Benzos”) for Insomnia in older adults: What you should know

What is a benzodiazepine?

- Class of medications that are known as sedative-hypnotics
- Prescribed for conditions such as anxiety or panic attacks, seizures and sometimes for sleep
- Examples: Alprazolam (Xanax), Diazepam (Valium), Clonazepam (Klonopin)
- *The American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation Choosing Wisely Campaign recommends against use of benzodiazepines for those 65 years or older*

Test your knowledge (true or false):

- 1) This medication is the best option to treat my insomnia
 - a) True
 - b) False
- 2) This medication has only mild side effects
 - a) True
 - b) False
- 3) Without this medication, I will likely have a lot of difficulty sleeping
 - a) True
 - b) False
- 4) This medication can be addictive
 - a) True
 - b) False
- 5) My body does not change in the way it processes medications throughout my life
 - a) True
 - b) False

Answers:

- 1) False, there are many other ways to address insomnia
- 2) False, there are many side effects (listed below)
- 3) True, as your body is probably dependent on it. However, this can be overcome by slowly coming off the medication.
- 4) True, benzodiazepines have significant risk of addiction
- 5) False, as we age, our body changes how it processes medications. This can mean that we are more prone to side effects

Questions to ask yourself:

- Do you feel tired or groggy during the day?
- Do you ever feel “hungover” in the morning, even though you have not been drinking?
- Do you ever have problems with your balance?
- Do you ever have problems with your memory?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, your benzodiazepine may be contributing.

Benzodiazepines have many **side effects**, including:

- Addiction or dependence
- Cognitive deficits
- Increased risk of falls and fractures
- Increased risk of car crashes
- Feeling “hangover” the next day

So, what can you do to come off your benzodiazepine?

- Do not abruptly stop taking your medication
- **Talk to your doctor about a safe way to slowly reduce your dose**
- There are many other ways to help with insomnia
 - See “Sleep Hygiene” handout for more information

References:

ABIM Foundation (2019, September 17). Geriatrics - benzodiazepines in older insomniac adults: Choosing wisely. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <https://www.choosingwisely.org/clinician-lists/american-geriatrics-society-benzodiazepines-sedative-hypnotics-for-insomnia-in-older-adults/>

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