



Benzodiazepines

What Are They?

Benzodiazepines are depressant drugs that produce a drowsy or calming effect. Benzodiazepines can be prescribed by doctors in liquid, injection, or pill form. They can be helpful in treating people with sleep disorders, seizure disorders, anxiety disorders and panic attacks. These drugs can be addictive and should be handled with care and safely stored.

Benzodiazepines are available illegally on the streets in many forms and can be unknowingly mixed in with other illicit drugs. Designer benzodiazepines are a type of illegally manufactured benzodiazepines that are made to mimic approved and prescribed benzodiazepines.

Benzodiazepines can go by many other names, such as benzos and downers.

WARNING: Buyer Beware! Benzodiazepines sold on the streets (including in the NWT) are illicit drugs. Always assume illicit drugs may contain a very dangerous mixture of potentially lethal synthetic (man-made) opioids like fentanyl and other additives.

What Do They Look Like?

Benzodiazepines can take many different forms. They are typically sold illegally as a crushed powder or pills, or are cut into (mixed with) drugs such as heroin or fentanyl. Benzodiazepines are often mixed in with other substances so people might end up using them without realizing.

WARNING: Buyer Beware! Street drugs can also look like prescription medication (ex. Percocet® or Oxycodone). Never take prescription drugs that have not been provided by a physician or pharmacist.

How Do They Work?

Benzodiazepines are depressants that slow the body and mind, which can cause sleepiness and a relaxed mood.

Why Are They Dangerous?

Benzodiazepines are addictive drugs that can have widespread effects on a person's life, including physical, mental, and social harms. Short-term health effects include:

- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Drowsiness
- Constipation
- Memory loss
- Slurred speech
- Muscle weakness
- Loss of coordination and balance



Some people can also experience delusions, hallucinations, skin reactions, anxiety, restlessness, agitation, irritability and aggressiveness. Over time, benzodiazepines can result in physical dependence and problems learning or concentrating.

Because people using illicit benzodiazepines do not know the actual strength of the drug or its true contents, they are at a high risk of overdose or death. Many other drugs – especially opioids – are now being contaminated with benzodiazepines, which increases the danger of using illicit substances.

If a person tries to stop using benzodiazepines suddenly, they can be at high risk for relapse and overdose due to changes in tolerance. **Avoid quitting “cold turkey” – talk to a health care provider about it first**

What Does Benzodiazepine Toxicity Look Like?

Signs of benzodiazepine toxicity may include slurred speech, confusion, uncoordinated movements, slow/shallow breathing or no breathing, not moving and can't be woken up. **This can look very similar to an opioid overdose!**

Benzodiazepines do not respond to Naloxone and can cause **prolonged sedation**. Prolonged sedation is when someone is breathing normally but is unresponsive.

If you suspect someone may have overdosed, **call 9-1-1** immediately. **Give Naloxone** if their breathing is not normal! Many illicit drugs are mixed with opioids which Naloxone does reverse the effects of by restoring breathing. Naloxone will not reverse sedation caused by benzodiazepines. Stop giving Naloxone when breathing is normal. Stay with them while you wait for help. The **Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act** protects you from drug possession charges when helping in an overdose situation.

Safer Use Tips

If you are taking benzodiazepines that have been legally prescribed to you by a health care provider:

- **Only trust medicine that comes from the pharmacy directly.** Pills can look like they are prescription, but they may be counterfeit.
- **Store medications in a locked cabinet** away from children, friends, and visitors.
- **Keep track** of how much medicine is in the container.
- **Safely dispose of any leftover benzodiazepines** as soon as you no longer need them by returning to your pharmacy. Do not flush or throw your medication in the garbage.

There is **no safe way** to use benzodiazepines that is not prescribed to you. If you are using illicit benzodiazepines, here are some tips that may decrease your risk:



- **Start low and go slow.** Start with a “tester dose” and wait before taking more. Be aware that pausing or reducing use, even for a few days, can significantly lower your tolerance – starting low and going slow can decrease the risk of a fatal overdose.
- **Don’t use alone.** If you are using alone, call NORS -- the National Overdose Response Service Hotline, at 1-888-688-NORS (6677) so you can get help if you need it.
- **Don’t mix with other substances,** including alcohol and prescription or over-the-counter medications.
- **Don’t share equipment!** Sharing drug equipment like needles, pipes or spoons increases risk of infection. Contaminated equipment can spread several serious diseases, such as HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C.
- If smoking from a pipe, don’t use steel wool or Brillo as a filter. Use brass screens instead.
- **Stay hydrated.** Drink water and use lip balm.
- **Know the signs of an opioid overdose and act!** Stay within cell range or have access to a satellite phone in case you need to call 9-1-1. **Always carry Naloxone with you and know how to use it.** Kits are available for free at locations across the NWT – **make sure your kit doesn’t freeze!**
- **Take a photo of the drug** before you use it. If you end up getting sick, this can help keep other people safe and makes it easier to help you.

Need Help?

Reach out to your local health centre, community counsellor/mental health professional, or call 8-1-1.