

# Benzodiazepine Use Among Older Adults



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Canadian Coalition for  
Seniors' Mental Health  
Coalition Canadienne pour la Santé  
Mentale des Personnes Âgées

## What are Benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines and Z-drugs work by slowing down your brain activity. This has the effect of making you feel drowsy or calm. These medications are often prescribed to help treat anxiety and sleep problems.



## Are you currently taking any of the following medications?

They are Benzodiazepines and Z-drugs.

If you are not sure, ask your pharmacist or doctor.

- ☐ Alprazolam
- ☐ Bromazepam
- ☐ Chlordiazepoxide
- ☐ Clobazam
- ☐ Clonazepam
- ☐ Clorazepate
- ☐ Diazepam
- ☐ Flurazepam
- ☐ Lorazepam
- ☐ Midazolam
- ☐ Nitrazepam
- ☐ Oxazepam
- ☐ Temazepam
- ☐ Triazolam
- ☐ Zolpidem
- ☐ Zopiclone

### DID YOU KNOW?

Benzodiazepines are among the most prescribed medications in Canada, particularly to older adults.

## Should older adults take benzodiazepines?

Usually, no. Doctors are advised to avoid prescribing these medications to older adults whenever possible.

If prescribed, they should not be taken for longer than **4 weeks in a row**.

*Benzodiazepines can help reduce anxiety and sleep problems for a few days or weeks, but they can have dangerous effects on your health and well-being.*



## What are the health risks of taking benzodiazepines?

Older adults who are taking a benzodiazepine are more likely to experience:

- + Drowsiness
- + Clumsiness
- + Falls
- + Fractures
- + Confusion
- + Trouble breathing
- + Problems driving (this can cause car crashes)

### DID YOU KNOW?

Benzodiazepines should be avoided by older adults in most situations. This is because the potential risks of taking these medications are bigger than the potential benefits.

## Can benzodiazepines be taken at the same time as other medications or substances?

If an older adult is taking a benzodiazepine, they should not take any of the following substances at the same time:

- + Alcohol
- + Cannabis
- + Opioids (Narcotics)
- + Other Sedatives



## Are there other ways to help with my anxiety and sleep problems?

### *Talk Therapy*

Talk therapy typically involves visiting a trained therapist who can help you work out problems or thought patterns that may be contributing to your anxiety and sleep problems. Therapy can help you learn new skills to help reduce these problems. One effective type of talk therapy for anxiety and sleep problems is called Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). You can do CBT-based exercises with a therapist or on your own.

### *Lifestyle Changes*

There are many activities you can do during the day or before you go to bed that can help you get restful sleep.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Anxiety and sleep problems can sometimes be caused by depression. Your doctor can help you find out if you have depression and can help you get the right treatment if you do.

## Here are some examples of lifestyle changes:

### *Exercise*

Regular exercise can help with sleep. Even if you have mobility issues, there are still many activities you can do during the day to help prepare yourself for a good night's sleep. Always consult your healthcare provider before starting a new exercise routine.

### *Meditation*

Meditation can help you calm your mind when you are feeling stressed and can help you wind down at the end of the day. You can find easy-to-follow meditation videos and information on how to include them into your nightly routine on the **[mysleepwell.ca](https://mysleepwell.ca)** website.

*Ask your doctor for more information on these and other ways to help with anxiety and sleep problems without using medication.*





## What should I do if I am taking a benzodiazepine?

Healthcare providers are concerned about people taking benzodiazepines over long periods of time. These medications can cause harmful side effects, including falls, fractures and memory problems. They can also be addictive.

Consider talking with your healthcare provider about gradually reducing your dose of these pills and maybe even stopping them completely at some time in the future.





### SAFETY FIRST!

Stopping benzodiazepines suddenly can cause unpleasant, even dangerous side effects, known as withdrawal effects. To avoid these unpleasant effects, your healthcare provider can help to develop a plan to reduce your dose very slowly. Your healthcare provider can also help you find safer, more effective non-drug tools to help with anxiety and sleep.

## Tips for your next doctor's appointment

**Write a list of questions that you would like to ask your doctor.**

Before your appointment, it may be helpful to write down any questions or concerns that you have.

**Bring a family member or close friend to your appointments.**

A family member or close friend can provide support when talking with your doctor. They can also remind you to ask certain questions and can help you remember what your doctor said to you.





### **Request a full review of your medications every year.**

Medication reviews can help find potential problems with your medications and spot those that should be changed or stopped.

### **If you are taking a benzodiazepine, ask for more information about the risks and benefits.**

Asking questions about use of benzodiazepines, their risks, and benefits, will help you make good decisions about your health.

## Where can I get more information?

### Helpful Organization Websites

Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH)  
**[ccsmh.ca](http://ccsmh.ca)**

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA)  
**[ccsa.ca](http://ccsa.ca)**

Canadian Deprescribing Network  
**[deprescribingnetwork.ca](http://deprescribingnetwork.ca)**

Choosing Wisely Canada (CWC)  
**[choosingwiselycanada.org](http://choosingwiselycanada.org)**



## Where can I get information on sleep, relaxation and on gradually stopping benzodiazepines?

EMPOWER Brochure about deprescribing (or gradually stopping) benzodiazepines

[www.criugm.qc.ca/fichier/pdf/BENZOeng.pdf](http://www.criugm.qc.ca/fichier/pdf/BENZOeng.pdf)

How to get a good night's sleep without medication.

[www.criugm.qc.ca/fichier/pdf/Sleep\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.criugm.qc.ca/fichier/pdf/Sleep_brochure.pdf)

Sleep and relaxation activities  
[mysleepwell.ca](http://mysleepwell.ca)

This brochure is adapted from the Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH) *Canadian Guideline on Benzodiazepine Receptor Agonist Use Disorder Among Older Adults*.

**Disclaimer:** This brochure is intended for information purposes only. It is not intended to offer medical advice or be interpreted or used as a standard of medical practice.







Canadian Coalition  
for Seniors' Mental Health

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Coalition Canadienne pour  
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