



DEPRESSANTS

Depressants are a class of drug. Contrary to the name, they do not make users feel depressed, rather, they slow down the activity of the central nervous system and the messages going between the brain and the body. Apart from alcohol and cannabis, other depressants are benzodiazepines, and analgesics/ pain killers.

BENZODIAZEPINES

Benzodiazepines (commonly known as benzos) are depressant drugs. Also known as “minor tranquillisers”, they are prescribed by doctors to relieve stress and anxiety and to help people sleep. Some people use benzodiazepines illegally to become intoxicated.

Like other depressants, benzodiazepines work by slowing down the activity of the central nervous system. In the short term, they can help with relaxation, calmness and relief from tension and anxiety. But they do not solve the problem that caused the anxiety in the first place and they can have a range of unwanted side effects.

What do they look like?

Benzodiazepines usually come in the form of tablets and capsules, in a range of colours and designs.

How are they used?

Benzodiazepines are prescribed medications used as sedatives/hypnotics (to induce sleep) or anxiolytics (to relieve anxiety). They are also used to treat epilepsy, to relax muscles, to help people withdraw from alcohol, or as an anaesthetic before surgery. However, some people use benzodiazepines illegally to become intoxicated.

Effects: Low to moderate doses

The immediate effects of low to moderate doses include mild impairment of thought processes, memory and coordination; drowsiness, tiredness and lethargy, dizziness, vertigo, and blurred or double vision. The person may experience a dry mouth, slurred speech and stuttering, tremors, nausea and vomiting, loss of appetite, constipation or diarrhoea. Feelings of euphoria or isolation and emotional depression may also occur.

Effects: Higher doses

Higher doses can result in drowsiness, over-sedation and sleep. They may produce an effect similar to alcohol intoxication. Other effects can include confusion, poor coordination, impaired judgement, loss of memory, and dizziness. Mood swings/ aggressive outbursts may also occur. Feelings of jitteriness and excitability often become evident as the effects of large doses wear off.

Effects: Overdose

An overdose can cause respiratory depression, unconsciousness or coma. Death rarely occurs from overdose of benzodiazepines alone, but deaths can occur if large doses are combined with alcohol or other drugs. Deaths can also occur from inhalation of mucus or vomit.

Effects: long-term

Using high doses of benzodiazepines in the long term may result in:

- muscle weakness
- skin rashes
- weight gain
- increased risk of accidents
- increased risk of falling
- sexual problems
- menstrual irregularities
- memory loss
- confusion and difficulty thinking clearly
- lethargy and lack of motivation
- fatigue

- drowsiness
- difficulty sleeping and disturbing dreams
- nausea
- personality change and changes in emotional responses
- anxiety
- irritability, paranoia and aggression; and
- depression.

Tolerance and dependence

People who are physically dependent on benzodiazepines can develop a tolerance to the drug. This can happen very quickly and means that more of the drug is required to get the same effect. Dependence on benzodiazepines can be psychological, physical, or both. Dependence is not related to the size or physical effect of the dose taken.

Psychologically dependent people feel as though they require benzodiazepines to feel 'normal'. They crave the drug and find it very difficult to stop using it. People who are physically dependent on benzodiazepines have become used to functioning with the drug present. Dependent people may experience physical withdrawal symptoms which can include:

- headaches
- aching or twitching muscles
- tremor
- faintness or dizziness
- sweating
- nausea, vomiting and stomach pains
- bizarre dreams
- inability to sleep properly
- fatigue
- difficulty concentrating
- anxiety and irritability
- altered perception; and
- heightening of the senses of sight, touch, hearing, smell and taste.

Other less common withdrawal symptoms may include delirium, delusions, hallucinations, seizures and paranoia.

Make regular appointments with your health professional to review your medication and discuss possible alternatives. If you are using benzodiazepines for non-medical purposes and you are planning to stop using them, talk to a health professional and make sure you have medical support for a gradual withdrawal program.

ANALGESICS

Analgesics, also known as "painkillers", are used medically to relieve pain.

Many analgesics are relatively safe to use when taken as prescribed or instructed by your doctor or pharmacist, in conjunction with the manufacturer's instructions on the packaging. Some extra precautions may apply to patients with pre-existing medical conditions such as kidney failure or gastric ulcers.

What do they look like?

Analgesics are available in many forms. These include tablets, capsules, suppositories, soluble powders and liquids. Some people may misuse analgesics in error or deliberately.

How are they used?

Analgesics are used to relieve pain. Some analgesics can also be used to reduce fever, to help relieve the symptoms of cold and flu, soothe swollen tissues, reduce inflammation, control diarrhoea, and as a cough suppressant.

Health professionals may also prescribe analgesics for a range of other medical conditions.

When taking any kind of medicine, including analgesics, it is important to follow the directions of your health professional and on the packaging of the analgesic. All medicines, even those that can be purchased without a prescription, have side effects that can damage your health.

Some people misuse analgesics. They may intentionally take more than the recommended dose, or they may take it for longer than the recommended period. Some people may also take analgesics when they do not need to, or they may use them in an attempt to become intoxicated.

Analgesics and other drugs

Combining analgesics with other drugs, including prescribed medicines, alcohol and illicit drugs, can alter the effects, sometimes with unpredictable consequences. For example:

- Drinking alcohol while taking certain analgesics such as aspirin and ibuprofen can increase the risk of gut irritation and discomfort.
- Some analgesics, such as aspirin and ibuprofen, can alter the effects of some blood pressure medicines and may increase bleeding tendencies associated with medicines such as warfarin.

- Taking codeine with some medicines, such as sedatives, certain antidepressants and certain antihistamines, can increase the sedative effects and reduce the breathing rate.
- Naltrexone blocks the effects of codeine and other opioids.

Reducing the risks

Follow carefully the directions of your health professional, or on the packaging of the analgesic, and do not exceed the recommended dose. If you are concerned about the amount of analgesics you are taking, talk to a health professional.

All medicines, including those that can be purchased over the counter, can have side effects and can damage your health if they are misused.

DEPRESSANTS AND THE LAW

Some depressants, such as cannabis and heroin, are illegal in Australia. Federal and State/ Territory penalties apply for their possession, cultivation and sale.

Alcohol is legally available to adults over the age of 18 across Australia, however it is illegal to do certain activities, such as drive motor vehicles, with varying levels of alcohol in the bloodstream. If drinking, plan ahead and arrange a way to get home without driving.

Some prescription medicines such as benzodiazepines, other sleeping pills/ tranquillisers and over the counter analgesics/ pain killers can also affect driving ability. Consult your health professional for more information.

IN EMERGENCIES ALWAYS CALL 000.

Ambulance officers are not obliged to involve the police if called to attend to a suspected overdose. Don't delay if you think your friends are in need of assistance.

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