

Benzodiazepines

Benzodiazepines (benzos) are a group of drugs including diazepam (Valium), chlordiazepoxide (Librium), oxazepam, clonazepam, and lorazepam (Ativan).

How they work:

Benzos work similarly to alcohol by calming your nervous system, which decreases alcohol withdrawal symptoms like headaches, sweating, seizures, and delirium tremens (DTs). They are the only medication that have been proven to help with the severe, deadly symptoms of withdrawal.

Dosage:

- Benzos comes in a variety of strengths. The dosage and number of days benzos are prescribed is based on severity of symptoms. The dosage is lowered each day as symptoms decrease.
 - Benzos are usually prescribed for 4–7 days until alcohol withdrawal symptoms are manageable without them.
 - How often you take benzos will depend on which benzo you are prescribed. Some benzos work very quickly for a short time, while others work more slowly over a longer time.
 - Benzos can make you feel calm, at peace, and less anxious, which can make you want to take more or continue past 4-7 days. Lowering the dose each day until your alcohol withdrawal symptoms are manageable helps prevent addiction and negative long-term effects.
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Side effects:

- Most common: drowsiness, dizziness, and muscle weakness.
- Less common: balance problems that can lead to falls, and major confusion.

What to expect:

- Your risk of **severe** alcohol withdrawal symptoms will be assessed by your health care provider if you decide to stop or reduce drinking. If you're at high risk, you will likely be offered treatment in a hospital or in a detox centre where you will stay for 3-7 days. If these services are not available in your community, your health care provider will make a plan with you.
 - You may be given other treatments such as vitamins and fluids as well.
 - Your health care team will check in with you frequently while you're taking benzos to check on your symptoms and prevent emergencies.
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Risks:

- Benzos may not be recommended if:
 - You have a lung, liver, or kidney condition.
 - You are over the age of 65, have dementia, or have physical conditions that lead to a higher risk of falls and fractures.
- Benzos can be addictive if they are taken for too long. It's very important to only take the dose that has been prescribed and to stop after 4-7 days. Using benzos for too long can cause memory loss and problems learning or concentrating.
- Avoid driving, operating dangerous machinery, or doing other potentially dangerous activities that need you to be alert and coordinated while taking benzos.
- **WARNING: Mixing benzos with other substances that are “downers” (including alcohol and opioids) can slow your breathing or even cause death. For your safety, it's important to talk with your health care provider about what can be mixed safely, including both prescribed and non-prescribed substances. If you're not able to stop using other substances, there are ways to reduce your risk, like not using alone, taking a smaller amount than normal to start, and spacing out your use to avoid mixing substances.**