Prescription Depressants
(Benzodiazepines & Sleep Medications)

What are prescription depressants?
• Prescription depressants (also called sedatives or tranquilizers) are medications that slow down the normal activity of the brain. They include:
  • Benzodiazepines such as diazepam (Valium), alprazolam (Xanax), and clonazepam (Klonopin).
  • Sleep medications such as zolpidem (Ambien), eszopiclone (Lunesta), and Sonata (zaleplon).
  • Barbiturates such as phenobarbital (Luminal), pentobarbital (Nembutal), and mephobarbital (Mebaral).
• When taken as prescribed by a doctor (usually in pill or capsule form), they can help treat conditions such as sleep, anxiety, and seizure disorders. However, when misused, they can have severe negative health consequences.
• Prescription depressants misuse means taking someone else’s medication or taking more (or more often) than prescribed.

There are other ways to treat sleep problems, anxiety, and panic than with prescription depressants
• Good sleep habits (sleep hygiene), including decreasing caffeine, can help you not need sleep medications (https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about_sleep/sleep_hygiene.html).
• Cognitive-behavior therapy and antidepressant medications can be more effective than benzodiazepines for treating panic and anxiety.

Tips for quitting

Getting started
• People who have been using prescription depressants for as little as 3-4 weeks can have withdrawal symptoms if they stop suddenly.
• Lowering your dose too quickly can be dangerous.
• Get help from a medical professional to lower your dose (called tapering) safely.

Know your options
• Treatment. Treatment should include medical help to decrease and stop using the medication, and substance use counseling. Treatment can be residential or outpatient.
• Counseling. One effective form of counseling is cognitive behavioral therapy. This type of therapy focuses on helping to change thinking, expectations, and behaviors and increasing skills for coping with life stress.
• Peer support groups and recovery supports are important to help people stay in recovery.

Risks of prescription depressant misuse

Short Term
• Overdose, which means taking more of a prescription depressant than your body can handle. Signs of an overdose include slow shallow breathing, slow heart rate, confusion, sleepiness, difficulty walking and talking, and unconsciousness.

Long Term
• Tolerance, which means needing more prescription depressants to get the same feeling, and this can cause many negative effects (see other side).
• Addiction, which is a brain disease that is manifested by compulsive substance use despite harmful consequences.
• Withdrawal, which means the symptoms you have when you stop using, including shakiness, rapid heartbeat, anxiety, insomnia, hallucinations, and seizures. It can cause death.

Mixing prescription depressants with other substances
• When taking prescription depressants avoid prescription pain medicines (opioids), certain over-the-counter cold and allergy medications (antihistamines), alcohol and other depressants because that can cause a significant drop in heart rate, slowed breathing, and increase in the risk of overdose, and death.
• Do not take prescription depressants to try to counteract the effects of stimulants.

Prescription depressants and pregnancy
• Misusing prescription depressants while pregnant can cause harmful health effects in babies.
• Talk to your doctor if you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant.

Do not borrow or share prescription depressants
• Taking prescription depressants that are not prescribed to you is dangerous, and can cause or worsen existing health problems.
• Pills may look the same but could be different medicines, or have different amounts of medicine in each pill.

Helpful links
https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/prescription-drugs/cns-depressants/what-are-cns-depressants

Sources: Indiana University SBIRT@IU; NIDA, Facts on CNS Depressants; NIH, What are CNS depressants
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**Effects on the Body**

- Death, coma, dizziness, sleepiness, memory loss, poor concentration
- Being paranoid, impulsive, depressed, aggressive or restless
- Blurred vision, dilated pupils
- Slurred speech
- Slow, shallow breathing
- Nausea, vomiting
- Weak and rapid pulse
- Liver problems
- Problems walking and balancing, slow reflexes

**During pregnancy**: birth defects, withdrawal in baby, delays in developmental milestones

**In women**: decreased sex drive, menstrual problems

**In Men**: decreased sex drive

Visit [www.sbirt.care](http://www.sbirt.care) for more resources!

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