

# 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](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.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-FFR2-2015/NSDUH-FFR2-2015.pdf>

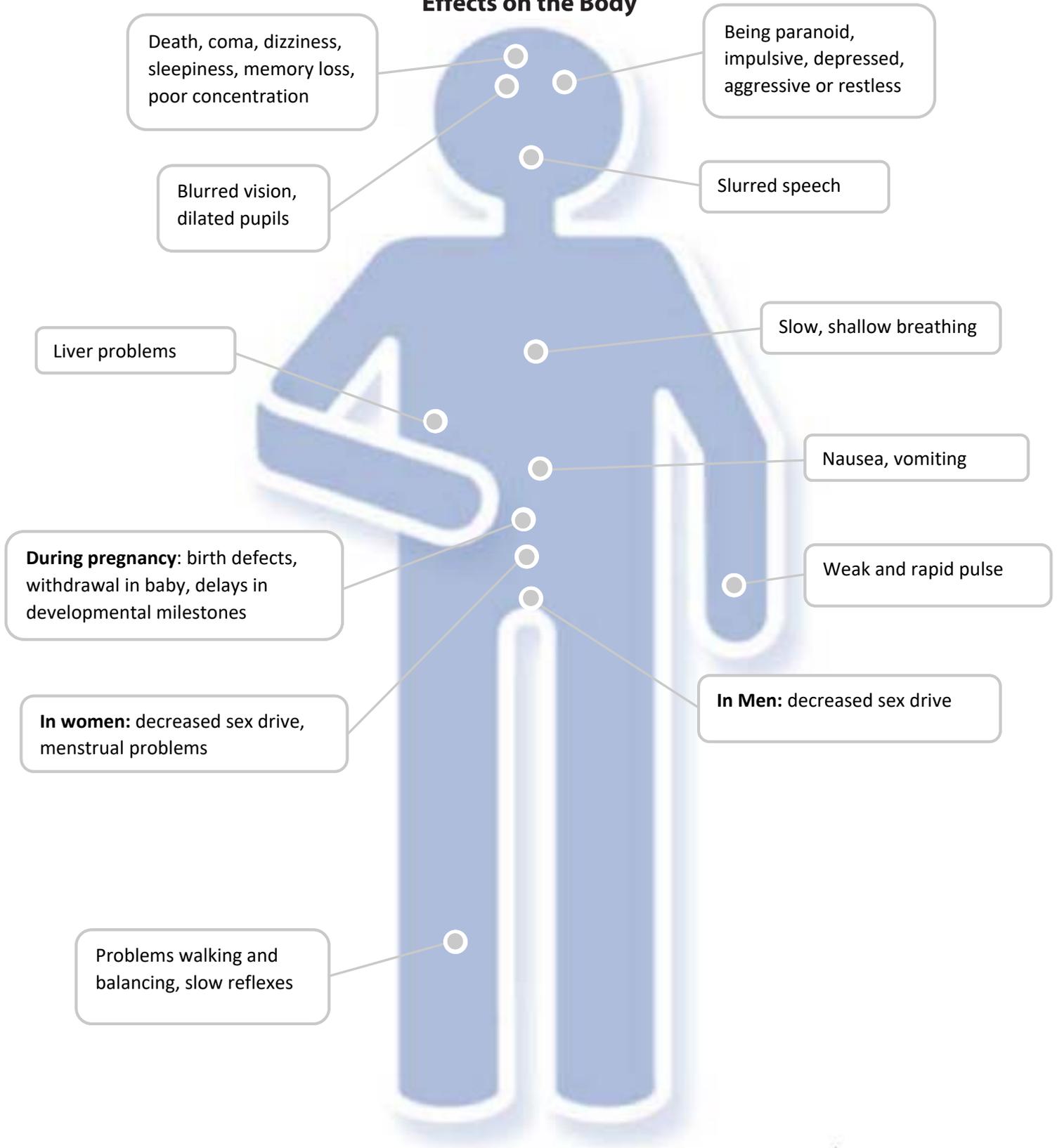
<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/prescription-drugs/cns-depressants/what-are-cns-depressants>

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

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### Effects on the Body



Mid-America (HHS Region 7)

**ATTC**

Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network  
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

