

Benzodiazepines

Benzos, minor tranquillisers, diazepam (Valium), lorazepam (Ativan), chlordiazepoxide (librium), nitrazepam (Mogadon) flunitrazepam (Rohypnol), temazepam

What are Benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are the most commonly prescribed minor tranquilisers, known as anxiolytics (for daytime anxiety relief) and hypnotics (to promote sleep).

The law

All benzodiazepines are **Prescription Only** medicines under the [Medicines Act](#). This means they can only be legally supplied by a pharmacist in accordance with a doctor's prescription. They are also controlled as a class C drug under the [Misuse of Drugs Act](#). This also makes it illegal to supply them to someone else, the maximum penalty being fourteen years imprisonment and a fine. Until recently, possession was not an arrestable offence if you did not have a prescription, except for [Rohypnol](#) and temazepam. Now police can arrest an individual in possession of any minor tranquilliser who cannot show a legitimate prescription for them.

Under the Misuse of Drugs Act possession brings with it a maximum sentence of two years and an unlimited fine or both. Selling them on can bring fourteen years and/or fine for trafficking.

Prevalence

Surveys suggest that one in seven British adults take benzodiazepines at some time during the year, and 1 in 40 take them throughout the year. The proportion of women using prescribed psychotropics is double the proportion of men.

There is no known illicit manufacture of benzodiazepines. The benzodiazepines which circulate on the illicit market are diverted from legitimate clients either by over-prescription, that is to say individuals selling on part, or all, of their legitimately prescribed drugs, or by theft from pharmacies, hospitals or retailers.

History

Tranquillisers were first manufactured in the 1960s and seen as safe, non-addictive drugs which could be used by doctors to treat anxiety and sleeping pills. They were at first regarded as a hazard-free alternative to the prescribing of barbiturates.

Although many people, particularly women, suffered serious side effects and dependence prescribing of tranquillisers continued to grow for over 20 years. It was not until the late 1970s that these problems were openly acknowledged. Prescriptions for tranquillisers fell from just over 30 million in 1979 to less than half that amount in the late 1990s. Despite this fall tranquillisers are still the most commonly prescribed mood-altering drugs in the UK.

Effects/risks

Tranquillisers are sedative drugs which slow down people's reactions and can make them feel drowsy, lethargic and forgetful. They relieve anxiety and tension and can make people feel more calm and relaxed. Effects begin after 10-15 minutes and can last up to 6 hours without repeating the dose.

"It's like a dream state. It gets you away from it all. It cushions you so you don't worry or care anymore. You don't really know what is going on".

The effect of slowing reactions and making people drowsy can make accidents more likely. It can be dangerous to drive while on tranquillisers. With regular use [tolerance](#) can develop quickly so increasing amounts are needed to get the same effect. [Dependence](#) can also quickly develop with regular use so that withdrawal can lead to intense anxiety, nausea, insomnia, irritability and headaches. Sudden [withdrawal](#) from very high doses can be very dangerous and result in confusion and serious convulsions. Many people find it very difficult to give up and may need a gradually reduced dosage to do so.

"Temazepam took over my life. It creeps up on you and is very addictive. I started using to bring me down from acid trips to make me feel normal. I liked them and started to use more and more. And that's when the problems really started because I couldn't leave them alone".

Regular users often find that after a time tranquillisers become ineffective in giving the desired effect. Continual use may mean they become ineffective as sleeping pills after 2 weeks and ineffective to combat anxiety after 4 months. The temptation is then to increase the dosage. Tranquillisers are only really effective as short term medicines but many people are dependent and have been taking them for several years.

A lot of tranquillisers have to be taken to fatally overdose but there have been many cases where people have died when also drinking alcohol.

Updated June 2006

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