

# Benzodiazepines for Alcohol Withdrawal

- Benzodiazepines (often called “benzos”) are a group of medications that can be used to treat anxiety, seizures, and alcohol withdrawal.
- When you suddenly stop using alcohol, some chemicals in your brain may get out of balance. Benzodiazepines help balance these brain chemicals. This helps to treat your alcohol withdrawal symptoms.
- Diazepam and lorazepam are 2 benzodiazepines that are used to manage all stages of alcohol withdrawal.
- Talk with your prescriber if you have pre-existing liver problems.

## How do I take this medication?

- You can take diazepam or lorazepam:
  - › Orally (by mouth)
  - › Through an intravenous (I.V.) tube put into a vein in your arm

## How do benzodiazepines help?

- Benzodiazepines can help treat these symptoms:
  - › Sweating
  - › Fast heartbeat
  - › High blood pressure
  - › Insomnia (trouble sleeping)
  - › Tremors (shaking you cannot control)
  - › Anxiety
  - › Feeling restless
  - › Seizures (sudden electrical brain activity that can change how you act, move, or feel for a short time)
  - › Hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not real)
  - › Delirium tremens (DTs). Please ask your health care team for more information about DTs.
- Diazepam and lorazepam usually start working within 1 hour.

## How will my prescriber decide which benzodiazepine is right for me?

- Diazepam is the most common benzodiazepine used to manage alcohol withdrawal.

- You may get a prescription for lorazepam if:
  - › You are 65 years old or older
  - › You have liver problems

## How much medication will I need?

- The dose (amount) of medication you need depends on:
  - › Your age
  - › How your body responds to the medication
  - › How well your liver works
  - › If you have had withdrawal seizures in the past
- Your health care team will also check your withdrawal symptoms often to decide the right dose for you.

### **Do not take high doses of benzodiazepines with alcohol or opioids**

(like hydromorphone, morphine, or oxycodone). This can lead to:

- › Respiratory depression (when a person does not breathe in enough air)
- › Death

## What are the possible side effects?

- The most common side effect is drowsiness (feeling tired).
- Other side effects include:
  - › Confusion
  - › Feeling dizzy
  - › Euphoria (feeling very excited and happy)
  - › Trouble keeping your balance

- **This medication is for treating your alcohol withdrawal. You will need to stop taking this medication when your alcohol withdrawal is over.**
- **There are different medications that can help you stop drinking alcohol.**
- If you want to learn more about how to stop drinking alcohol, talk to your prescriber or your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner).

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

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