

Sedatives and Sleeping Pills: Understanding the risks

What are they?

Sedatives and sleeping pills are central nervous system depressants—or medicines that slow your brain activity. They're also sometimes called tranquilizers.

Examples of sedatives and sleeping pills include:

- Benzodiazepines (Xanax, Valium, Ativan, Klonopin, Halcion, ProSom, and Librium). On the street, these are sometimes called candy, downers, sleeping pills, or tranks.
- Other sleeping pills (Ambien, Lunesta, Sonata).
- Barbiturates (Nembutal, Luminal Sodium, and Mebaral).

How are they used?

Sedatives and sleeping pills can help treat sleep problems, anxiety, acute stress reactions, or panic attacks. Barbiturates may also be prescribed to treat seizure disorders. However, these medicines carry risks, and unfortunately they are often abused. When abused, sedatives and sleeping pills can be as dangerous as “street” drugs. It's important to know the risks.

What are the risks?

Sedatives and sleeping pills are dangerous when taken together with alcohol, opioids, prescription pain medicines, and other drugs. Mixing them with these substances slows your heart rate and breathing. This can cause overdose or death, even the first time you take them together.

Sedatives and sleeping pills can cause serious side effects, including difficulty breathing, slurred speech, poor concentration and memory, confusion, dizziness, blurred vision, slow heartbeat, nausea, headaches, and uncoordinated or unsteady body movement.



Sedatives and sleeping pills can worsen your ability to operate a vehicle safely. It is illegal to drive under the influence of a medicine that makes you incapable of operating a vehicle safely.

If you use sedatives or sleeping pills over a long period of time you may develop a tolerance. This means you need more and more of the drugs to get the same effect. They may stop working altogether. So even if you take them, you may still have sleep problems or anxiety.

If you stop taking them suddenly you can have severe withdrawal symptoms. Withdrawal symptoms include seizures, anxiety, panic attacks, tremors, nausea, and other problems. Stopping barbiturates suddenly can kill you. You need a trained healthcare provider to help you stop using safely.

You could become addicted. Addiction is a disease that affects how the brain processes rewards, motivation, and memories — and it causes symptoms that affect a person’s body and mind. Addiction causes a person to seek reward or relief in an unhealthy way through a behavior or substance. Addiction can cause strong cravings and a loss of control — it feels impossible to stop, even when the substance or behavior causes problems. It can affect a person’s emotional responses. It can also keep a person from recognizing problems with behaviors or relationships.

Learn more, get support

- Access information and resources.
National Institute on Drug Abuse
www.drugabuse.gov
- Locate treatment programs in your area.
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Questions for my doctor

Notes

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