



# Benzodiazepines, anxiety, and breathlessness

## Information for patients from Respiratory Medicine

This leaflet is for patients with respiratory conditions such as COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) who have anxiety related to their breathlessness.

You have been prescribed a drug in a class of drugs known as benzodiazepines, to help with your anxiety and breathlessness. This leaflet explains what this drug is, why it is used, and information about taking it.

### What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are a group of drugs that can be used to treat people who suffer from **severe anxiety**. They include Oxazepam, Diazepam, and lorazepam. **They should not be used to relieve mild nervousness or tension caused by daily stress.**

There are particular conditions that benzodiazepines can be useful to treat, and one of these is severe anxiety. However, it is not felt to be useful for the long term management of anxiety due to breathlessness.

### How do they work?

These drugs work by decreasing the excitability of brain cells, which has a calming effect on various parts of the brain.

Benzodiazepine treatment can work well and improve the symptoms of severe anxiety but it is not a long term solution to your anxiety and breathlessness. They are a useful tool to calm you while you find another solution to your condition.



### **How long does it take for the drug to start working?**

Each of the benzodiazepines take different lengths of time for the effect to show. The choice of benzodiazepine can depend on many things. If you are taking a benzodiazepine and find that it is not making you feel better then it is unlikely to work for you and you should stop taking it.

Please ask whoever prescribed you this medication for specific information about your medication. Information will also be found in the leaflet in the box the medication comes in.

### **How long do I need to take these for?**

You can usually stop taking benzodiazepines without any problems if you only take them for a short time (preferably two to four weeks) and stop as early as possible. If once you have stopped taking them you do experience any of the problems highlighted in this leaflet, please contact your GP.

You should not take benzodiazepine tablets for longer than four weeks. If you do, you will find that you will need to take more tablets for them to work and you may become dependent on the drug.

If, for some reason, you have been taking benzodiazepines for longer than four weeks you should get advice from a healthcare professional to ask if stopping it is appropriate and how to do that.

Before you are prescribed a benzodiazepine, your nurse or doctor will discuss with you why we think it may help. We will also make sure that you understand that you will only be given enough tablets to last two to four weeks. Benzodiazepine will not be re-prescribed nor will it be placed onto your repeat prescription.

### **Why has this treatment been recommended to me?**

Benzodiazepines are not usually the first choice of drug for people to take to help with anxiety due to breathlessness. Your doctor will suggest non-medical treatments first such as fan therapy, breathing positioning and exercises, and talking therapy such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), as these can be more helpful if your problem is a long term one. CBT is a talking therapy that can help you manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave. However, in some cases, a short course of benzodiazepines may help if your anxiety is acute, as the drug will 'calm' you while you try out the non-medical treatment options listed above.

Remember, benzodiazepines are not a long term solution to your anxiety and breathlessness. They are a useful tool to calm you while you find another solution to your condition.

If these treatments do not help with your anxiety due to breathlessness then other medicines such as SSRI (more commonly known as anti-depressants) might help. Small doses of opiates may also be helpful for patients who have been suffering with anxiety due to breathlessness but will only be used where the benefits appear to outweigh the risks.

Please discuss all these options with your doctor, and ask any questions you may have.

## Are there side effects to taking the drugs?

- Benzodiazepines may make you feel drowsy so please do not drive or operate machinery while taking them. This may also affect your work, and this will need to be considered before you decide to start taking the medication.
- Also, be careful if you are responsible for small children during this time, in case you fall asleep.
- They can also make you clumsy and you may be at risk of trips and falls. Older people taking benzodiazepines have an increased risk of falls and sustaining bone fractures such as hip injury. They are also more likely to experience side effects, which is why doses are usually reduced in the elderly.
- It is recommended that you avoid alcohol when on these medicines.
- Some people can become aggressive, confused, forgetful, or depressed when taking benzodiazepines. If you experience any of these symptoms please speak to your GP or the healthcare professional who prescribed them for you.
- There can be problems if you have liver or kidney disease, certain rare conditions, or are given a medication that can affect benzodiazepine. If you become very drowsy it may be because this condition was unknown in your case and you should generally stop the benzodiazepine and speak to a doctor. You should have been given a patient information leaflet when your pharmacist gave you the medication, please read this carefully. Please speak to a healthcare professional if the information in the leaflet appears to apply to you.
- Your body can quickly get used to the effect of benzodiazepines and we do not recommend taking them for long periods of time.
- Some people can become addicted to these medicines which may make it difficult to stop taking them and cause withdrawal symptoms. Typical withdrawal symptoms include anxiety, panic attacks, sweating, headaches, and shaking. Other symptoms may include being unable to sleep, nausea and vomiting, or oversensitivity to light and sound. To avoid becoming addicted you should not take benzodiazepines for more than four weeks.
- There is some evidence that people taking benzodiazepines over a long period of time may be at increased risk of developing dementia, Alzheimer's disease, or premature death.

## Can I drive when taking benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines may make you feel drowsy so please do not drive while taking them. Some of the drugs can remain in your system for a few days after you stop taking them, so please make sure you are fully alert again before you begin driving.

It is your responsibility to tell the DVLA if you have a medical condition that may affect driving [www.gov.uk/health-conditions-and-driving](http://www.gov.uk/health-conditions-and-driving)

### What should I do if I still feel anxious once I have stopped taking benzodiazepine?

If you continue to experience breathlessness along with anxiety, and the other treatments listed in this leaflet have not worked for you, please speak to your GP or specialist about any further options you may be able to try.

### What should I do if I feel unwell at home?

Please contact your GP if you feel unwell at home while taking this medication.

**This leaflet has been produced with and for patients**

If you would like this information in **another language, audio, Braille, Easy Read, or large print** please ask a member of staff.

**Any complaints, comments, concerns, or compliments** please speak to your doctor or nurse, or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01227 783145, or email [ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net)

**Further patient leaflets** are available via the East Kent Hospitals web site [www.ekhft.nhs.uk/patientinformation](http://www.ekhft.nhs.uk/patientinformation)