

Benzodiazepines for Alcohol Withdrawal

Benzodiazepines are a group of medications that work as sedatives. They are commonly called “benzos”.

Diazepam and lorazepam are 2 benzodiazepines used to manage all stages of alcohol withdrawal. When you suddenly stop using alcohol, some chemicals in your brain may get out of balance. Benzodiazepines work to balance these brain chemicals. This helps to treat your alcohol withdrawal symptoms.

How do I take this medication?

You can take diazepam or lorazepam:

- › orally (by mouth).
- › through an intravenous (IV) inserted (put in) into your arm.

How do benzodiazepines help?

Diazepam and lorazepam start to work quickly, usually within 1 hour. They help with:

- › Sweating
- › Fast heartbeat
- › High blood pressure
- › Insomnia (trouble sleeping)
- › Tremor
- › Anxiety
- › Fever (temperature above 38° C/100.4° F)
- › Restlessness
- › Seizures
- › Hallucinations (experiencing something that is not really there)
- › Delirium tremens (DTs) - Ask your health care team for more information.

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

- Diazepam is the most common benzodiazepine used to manage alcohol withdrawal.
- Lorazepam may be given to people who:
 - › are 65 years old or older.
 - › have liver issues.

How much medication will I need?

- The number of doses you need will depend on:
 - › Your age
 - › How well your liver works
 - › How your body responds to the medication
 - › If you have had withdrawal seizures in the past
- Your alcohol withdrawal symptoms will be checked often using the Clinical Institute Withdrawal Assessment of Alcohol Scale, Revised (CIWA-Ar).
- Knowing how bad your symptoms are will help us decide the right dose for you.

What are the possible side effects?

- The most common side effect is drowsiness (feeling tired).
- Other side effects include:
 - › Confusion
 - › Nausea (upset stomach) and vomiting (throwing up)
 - › Euphoria (feeling of great excitement and happiness)
 - › Trouble keeping your balance
- Talk with your prescriber if you have liver issues, or narrow-angle or untreated open-angle glaucoma.

- **Taking benzodiazepines in high doses with alcohol or opioids can lead to:**
 - › **Respiratory depression (near death overdose from low oxygen)**
 - › **Death**
- **Benzodiazepines should not be taken after the withdrawal phase to help you stop drinking alcohol.**

*Prepared by: Pharmacy Services, Aberdeen Hospital
Designed by: Nova Scotia Health Library Services*

The information in this pamphlet is for informational and educational purposes only.
The information is not intended to be and does not constitute health care or medical advice.
If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.