

Joint statement: avoid using prescription opioid and benzodiazepine medications at the same time

For Patients/Consumers

ScriptWise and the Faculty of Pain Medicine (ANZCA) advise patients to avoid using opioid and benzodiazepine medications (or other central nervous system depressants like alcohol) at the same time.

Too many Australians are dying due to overdoses involving prescription opioids and benzodiazepines. In 2016, an Australian most likely to die from a drug induced death was a middle-aged man misusing multiple prescription medications such as benzodiazepines or oxycodone¹. Benzodiazepines were also the most common drug present in drug induced deaths in 2016 (663 deaths involved benzodiazepines or 36.7%)¹. In over 96% of these drug deaths, they were taken with other drugs, including alcohol¹.

What are opioids?

Opioids are one of the main types of medications used to treat moderate to severe short-term pain after surgery or an injury. Common opioids include codeine, morphine, oxycodone, pethidine, fentanyl and tramadol. Using opioids for three months or longer is not recommended because it can lead to tolerance and opioid dependence as well as many other harms. There is also evidence long-term use can lead to worse pain than avoiding the medication altogether.

What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are a sedative medication (sometimes referred to as 'benzos' or sleeping tablets) and are usually prescribed to treat anxiety and/or insomnia for less than four weeks. Common benzodiazepines include diazepam, temazepam and alprazolam. It is possible to become dependent, and experience withdrawal symptoms when the medication is stopped, even when taking the prescribed dose.

What happens when you combine opioids and benzodiazepines?

The combined use of these medications can lead to increased risks of sedation, problems with slow or shallow breathing, a reduced drive to breathe and eventually coma and/or death.

In the body, opioids and benzodiazepines act to depress the central nervous system. These effects are further increased when the medications are used together or with other central nervous system depressants such as alcohol.

What do I do if I've been prescribed both of these medications?

If you have been prescribed a combination of opioid and benzodiazepine medications, talk with your prescriber (usually your GP) about how to reduce the risks of using these medications. This is an opportunity to speak about alternative and potentially more effective long-term treatments to manage your health condition/s such as pain and anxiety. Your prescriber can also work with you to develop a plan to reduce your medication use over time if needed. Some questions you might like to ask are:

- Are these two medications still the best way to treat my health condition/s?
- Are there other more effective alternatives available?
- Could we start to reduce my use of one (and eventually both) of these medications?
- Could I speak to you about getting a prescription for naloxone, an opioid overdose antidote, and can you help me explain how to use it?