



# Patient and Caregiver Information on Benzodiazepines and Anxiolytics

The name of your medication is \_\_\_\_\_.

## What is this drug used for?

This medication is used to **treat symptoms of anxiety**. Anxiety is a normal human response to stress and is considered necessary for effective functioning and coping with daily activities. It may, however, be a symptom of many other disorders, both medical and psychiatric. There are many different types of anxiety and there are many different approaches to treating it. Anxiolytics can help relieve the symptoms of anxiety but will not get rid of its cause. In usually prescribed doses, they help to calm and relax the individual; in high doses, these drugs may be used to induce sleep. Benzodiazepines may also be used as muscle relaxants, to stop seizures, and before some diagnostic procedures. Ask your doctor if you are not sure why you are taking this drug.

**Note:** These medications may not have formal approval by regulatory agencies such as Health Canada or the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use in children or adolescents for some or all of the above uses.

## How quickly will the drug start working?

Anxiolytic drugs can reduce agitation and induce calm or sedation usually within an hour. Sometimes they are given by injection or dissolved under the tongue for a quicker effect.

## How long should you take this medication?

Anxiety is usually self-limiting; often when the cause of anxiety is treated or eliminated, symptoms of anxiety will decrease. Therefore, anxiolytics are usually prescribed for a limited period of time. Many individuals take the medication only when needed (during periods of excessive stress) rather than on a daily basis. Tolerance or loss of effectiveness can occur in some individuals if the medication is used continuously beyond 4 months. If you have been taking the medication for a continuous period of time, your doctor may try to reduce the dose of this drug slowly to see if the anxiety symptoms return; if not, the dosage may be further reduced and you may be advised to stop using this medication.

**Do not increase the dose or stop the drug suddenly without consulting with your doctor.**

Some patients need to use an anxiolytic drug for longer time periods because of the type of anxiety they may be experiencing. Others require anxiolytic medication only from time to time, i.e., as needed.

## What side effects may happen?

Side effects may happen with any drug. They are not usually serious and do not happen to everyone. Side effects may sometimes occur before beneficial effects of the medication are noticed. Many side effects get better or go away over time. If you think you may be having a side effect, speak to your doctor or pharmacist as they can help you decrease it or cope with it.

**Common** side effects that should be reported to your doctor at the **NEXT VISIT** include:

- Feeling sleepy and tired – this problem goes away when the dose is reduced. Use of other drugs that make you drowsy will worsen the problem. Avoid driving a car or operating machinery if drowsiness persists.
- Muscle incoordination, weakness or dizziness – inform your doctor; an adjustment in your dosage may be needed.
- Forgetfulness, memory lapses – inform your doctor.
- Slurred speech – an adjustment in your dosage may be needed.
- Nausea or heartburn – if this happens, take the medication with food.
- Nervousness, excitement, restlessness, or any behavior changes – this type of reaction occurs more commonly in young children

**Less common** side effects that you should report to your doctor **RIGHT AWAY** include:

- Disorientation, confusion, worsening of memory, blackouts, difficulty learning new things or amnesia
- Incoordination leading to falls
- Skin rash

Let your doctor know **right away** if you miss your period or think you may be **pregnant**, plan to become pregnant, or are breastfeeding.

## Is this drug safe to take with other medication?

Because these drugs can change the effect of other medication or may be affected by other medication, always check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking other drugs, including those you can buy without a prescription such as cold remedies and herbal preparations. Always inform any doctor or dentist that you see that you are taking these drugs.

## Precautions/considerations

1. Do not change your dose or stop the drug suddenly without talking to your doctor, especially if you have a seizure disorder, have been on the medication for a number of months, or have been taking high doses. Anxiolytics need to be withdrawn gradually to prevent withdrawal reactions.
2. This drug may impair the mental and physical abilities required for driving a car or operating machinery. Avoid these activities if you feel drowsy or slowed down.
3. This drug may increase the effects of alcohol, making you more sleepy, dizzy, and lightheaded. If taken together with alcohol, this may make it dangerous for you to drive, operate machinery, or perform tasks that require careful attention.

## What else do I need to know about antianxiety drugs?

1. Take your medication with meals or with water, milk, orange or apple juice. Avoid grapefruit juice as it may change the amount of the drug in your body.

2. If you are taking sublingual lorazepam, dissolve the tablet under your tongue. The tablet will dissolve within 20 seconds, but you should not swallow for 2 minutes so the drug can be absorbed.
3. If you are taking extended-release alprazolam (Xanax XR) or clorazepate (Tranxene SD), do not cut, crush or chew the tablet. Rather, swallow it whole. Take this drug at the same time in relation to your meals (preferably in the morning).
4. Drinking a lot of caffeine (coffee, tea, caffeine-containing soft drinks, etc.) can cause you to become easily upset or jittery and make it harder for this drug to work.
5. Store your medication in a clean, dry area at room temperature. Keep all medication out of the reach of children.

**If you have any questions regarding this medication, please ask your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse.**