

This information is taken directly from <http://www.reconnexion.org.au>. Please go to their site for full information on benzodiazepines. Their mission is to inform and improve treatment outcomes for people who are experiencing tranquilliser dependency, anxiety disorders and depression.

Withdrawal syndrome from Benzodiazepines

Withdrawal is a series of physical, emotional and behaviour changes experienced when a drug is cut down or ceased. If you have become physically dependent on benzodiazepines, your body and brain have become so accustomed to having the drug every day that you will experience withdrawal symptoms when you cut down the dose or stop the drug.

It is estimated that between 50-80% of people who have taken benzodiazepines continually for six months or longer will experience withdrawal symptoms when reducing the dose.

People who have been taking benzodiazepines regularly for many years can have symptoms of withdrawal most of the time, even when they have not reduced the dose. Often they are unaware that their poor physical and mental health is related to their long term use of the benzodiazepines.

How severe are the symptoms of withdrawal?

Not everyone who cuts down or stops taking benzodiazepines has withdrawal symptoms, and the experience of withdrawal varies from person to person. Some people have a few weeks of discomfort only, while others have severe symptoms, often for months on end.

The range and severity of symptoms often take people by surprise, and for many people the intensity of benzodiazepine withdrawal is overwhelming.

How long does withdrawal last?

Withdrawal from benzodiazepines can take many weeks or months, or, for a very small percentage of people, even years. Usually the length of time someone has been taking benzodiazepines or the amount he or she has been taking will have the most impact on the time it takes for withdrawal symptoms to pass.

Apart from the length of time taking benzodiazepines and the dose, there are no predictors for the severity or otherwise of the withdrawal. Slowly reducing the dose of the drug minimises the severity of the withdrawal symptoms.

What is it like to experience benzodiazepine withdrawal?

The withdrawal period can be very erratic in nature. People withdrawing from benzodiazepines may experience days when they are totally free of symptoms, followed by days of mild or more severe withdrawal symptoms. The presence and severity of symptoms tend to fluctuate, and many people experience a wide range of symptoms.

One symptom which is particularly severe or troublesome may predominate for a time or for the whole withdrawal episode. People are often seriously ill or distressed at times during withdrawal.

Improvement occurs gradually, with more symptom –free days occurring and symptoms reducing in severity and number. Once through the withdrawal period, the majority of people recover completely, often experiencing good mental and physical health for the first time for a long time.

A number of people, however, have observed changes in their cognitive abilities following long term benzodiazepine use. Research undertaken by the School of Psychology at LaTrobe University has shown that many people who have been taking benzodiazepines long term have problems with concentration, learning and memory. (If you think this may have happened to you, it can be useful to undergo testing and a course of training.)

What are the symptoms of withdrawal?

There are many symptoms that can be experienced during benzodiazepine withdrawal. The following is a list of possible withdrawal symptoms:

Common withdrawal symptoms

Abdominal pains and cramp

Agoraphobia

Anxiety

Breathing difficulties

Blurred vision

Changes in perception (faces distorting and inanimate objects moving)

Depression

Distended abdomen

Dizziness

Extreme lethargy

Fears

Feelings of unreality

Flu-like symptoms

Heavy limbs

Heart palpitations

Hypersensitivity to light

Indigestion

Insomnia

Irritability

Lack of concentration

Lack of co-ordination

Loss of balance

Loss of memory

Muscular aches and pains

Nausea

Nightmares

Panic attacks

Rapid mood changes

Restlessness

Severe headaches

Shaking

Seeing spots before the eyes

Sore eyes

Sweating

Tightness in the chest

Tightness in the head

Rare withdrawal symptoms

Blackouts -an episode where the person has no recall of their activity.(This is rare with low dose use, but less rare when large amounts have been taken)

Bleeding from the nose

Bleeding between menstrual cycles

Burning along the spine

Burning sensation around the mouth

Discharge from the breasts

Falling hair

Haemorrhoids

Hypersensitivity to touch

Rectal bleeding

Sinus pain

Seizures (fits) Almost unknown if people reduce gradually. More common for people using high doses who stop suddenly.

Sensitive or painful teeth

Swollen breasts

Less common withdrawal symptoms

Aching jaw

Craving for sweet food

Constipation

Depersonalisation (a feeling of not knowing who you are)

Diarrhoea

Difficulty swallowing

Feeling of the ground moving

Hallucinations (auditory and visual)

Hyperactivity

Hypersensitivity to sound

Incontinence of urine, or frequency and urgency

Increased saliva

Loss or changes in appetite

Loss of taste or metallic taste

Menstrual problems (painful periods, irregular periods, cessation of periods)

Morbid thoughts

Numbness in any part of the body

Outbursts of rage or aggression

Paranoia

Painful scalp

Persistent, unpleasant memories

Pins and needles

Rapid changes in body temperature

Sexual problems (changes in libido)

Skin problems (dryness, itchiness, rashes, slow healing)

Sore mouth and tongue

Speech difficulties

Suicidal thoughts

Tinnitus (buzzing or ringing in the ears)

Unusually sensitive (unable to watch the news on television or read the newspaper)

Vaginal discharge

Uncharacteristic behaviour such as shoplifting

Vomiting

Weight loss or gain