

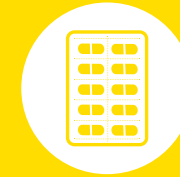
Courtney's story

// In the middle of a pretty rough patch, I went to the doctor and got some valium to calm me down and help me relax enough to sleep. They seemed to really help. I don't have a prescription any more, but I still like to use them every now and then. Sometimes I get some from my dad's house – he always has a box in his medicine cabinet and I figure he won't miss them. I can always get some from a friend too – I mean, they're medical, and I've used them before, so they can't be doing me too much harm can they?

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Contacts



**Level 6 Cosmopolitan Centre
Woden Square Canberra**

PO Box 538 Woden ACT 2606

P - 02 6132 4800

F - 02 6132 4801

E - reception@directionshealth.com

directionshealth.com

[facebook.com/directionsaod](https://www.facebook.com/directionsaod)

twitter.com/directionsaod

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ReGen

1800 700 514 (Freecall)

contact@regen.org.au

www.regen.org.au

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Benzos

**Facts
about**



Facts about Benzos

Benzodiazepines (often referred to as benzos) are a group of drugs prescribed by doctors to relieve stress and anxiety, and to help people sleep. Diazepam (Valium), temazepam, oxazepam and alprazolam (Xanax) are all benzos. Benzos are also used in the treatment of alcohol withdrawal, epilepsy, and for some other psychiatric disorders.

Some people use benzos to help them 'come down' from other drugs (especially stimulants like methamphetamine or ecstasy), but like any poly-drug use, this can lead to unexpected outcomes.

In some cases, combining benzos with other drugs can result in serious complications such as blackouts or violent behavior. When combined with other depressant drugs (like opioids and alcohol), benzos can significantly increase the risk of overdose. In fact, research shows that benzos are the mostly commonly linked drug with overdose fatalities.

It's important to remember that if you have problems sleeping or are suffering from stress and anxiety, benzos will not solve the problem. They are prescribed to give short-term relief whilst you make plans to treat the problem. Tolerance to benzos (needing to take more to get the same effect) can develop really quickly, and dependence (needing to keep taking them in order to feel 'normal') can occur in people who have been taking them for as little as two to three weeks, even at prescribed doses. This is why doctors should generally only prescribe benzos in small amounts at a time. Whilst benzos are fairly widely prescribed, it is still illegal to take them if they are not your prescription, even if you have taken them in the past.

Other prescription medication

There is a range of other prescription medications that are used illicitly (without a prescription). They include:

- Opioid-based pain-killers
- Other pain relief
- Medication such as dexamphetamine (commonly used to treat ADHD)
- Pharmacotherapies such as methadone
- Sleeping tablets

While they have a range of different effects, there are common safety issues for all of them:

- They are meant for the person they are prescribed for. Even if you have the same symptoms as that person, this does not mean that the drugs will affect you in the same way.
- Mixing them with other drugs, particularly alcohol, can make their effects stronger or more unpredictable. This increases the risk of overdose which can result in permanent injury or even death.

Reducing the Harms

The best way to reduce the harms associated with taking benzodiazepines and other prescription medication is to only use them as prescribed by your doctor. There are also a range of things you can do to reduce the possible harms to yourself and others:

- Use low doses and if you have been prescribed a dose for longer than a couple of weeks, talk to your doctor about alternatives.
- Try to deal with stress and anxiety without using benzos. Meditation, counselling, stress management and exercise can help reduce stress and anxiety. There are also other medications that can be prescribed to help with stress and anxiety.
- If you notice a tolerance starting to develop, talk to your doctor before increasing the dose.
- If you feel like you are developing a dependence to benzos, don't stop taking them suddenly – this can be dangerous. Talk to your doctor or your local alcohol and other drug service about safely decreasing your dose, as well as other treatment options available (see our 'Benzos –Getting Support' brochure).
- Do not inject benzos. Most benzos are intended to be taken orally and shouldn't be injected. Pill fragments do not dissolve fully and can stick to the inside of your veins, causing blocked collapsed veins, infected skin and serious damage to surrounding tissue. It can also lead to a stroke.
- Don't combine benzos with other drugs unless instructed to do so by your doctor.

