

Sleeping tablets

The following advice applies to people prescribed benzodiazepines (temazepam, loprazolam, lormetazepam, nitrazepam) or 'Z'- drugs (zolpidem and zopiclone).

Why are doctors reluctant to prescribe sleeping tablets?

Sleeping tablets may cause significant problems, which include:

- **Drowsiness and clumsiness.** People taking sleeping tablets are known to have more accidents (e.g. falls and car-related incidents), therefore it may not be safe to drive or operate machinery. Older people taking sleeping tablets have an increased risk of falling and sustaining bone fractures (e.g. hip injury).
- **Mood and mental changes.** Some people can become aggressive, confused, forgetful or depressed.
- **Dependence and tolerance.** Your body may rapidly get used to the effect of sleeping tablets; hence they may fail to help if you keep taking them. Some people may become addicted to sleeping tablets (i.e. dependence problems), which implies that withdrawal symptoms will occur if the medicine is stopped suddenly. Typical withdrawal symptoms include anxiety, panic attacks, sweating, headaches and shaking. Other symptoms may include the inability to sleep, sickness or being oversensitive to light and sound.

What is the alternative to sleeping tablets?

Your doctor, nurse or pharmacist can give you advice on how to tackle poor sleep without drug intervention. Advice includes reducing the intake of stimulants (e.g. caffeinated substances), more exercise and suggestions to improve your bedtime routine.

Advice if a sleeping tablet is prescribed

Sleeping tablet prescriptions will usually only last a short period (a week or so). Please do not ask for more, or for it to be added to your repeat prescription.

- If you feel drowsy the next day, do not drive or operate machinery.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Never give your sleeping tablets to anyone and always keep them in a safe place (locked cupboard).

Benzodiazepines and driving

A significant number of drivers (25%) involved in road traffic accidents have impaired driving skills owing to alcohol, drugs or illness.

The DVLA is responsible for deciding if a person is medically unfit to drive. It is the responsibility of the licence holder to inform the DVLA of any medical condition that may affect safe driving.

Failure to notify the DVLA if you have or have had these problems is a criminal offence that may lead to a fine of up to £1,000.

It is the responsibility of your GP to ensure that all steps are taken to maintain the safety of the patient and the general public. These issues will be discussed when you attend the appointment regarding your prescription.

What if you have been taking sleeping tablets regularly for some time?

As a rule, you should consider reducing or stopping them with advice from your doctor.

Do it gradually. Cut down the dose a little at a time.

Pick a good time to do it. It is best to wait until any life crises have passed and your stress levels are as low as possible. Consider stopping the tablets whilst on holiday, or when you have less pressure from work.

Remember to anticipate and accept that you are likely to have worse sleep when undertaking a tablet reduction regime. However, most people who reduce or stop sleeping tablet medication say they feel much better mentally and physically. There are leaflets available from your practice or pharmacy to help you with coping strategies, and tips on how to naturally improve your sleep pattern.

Look for possible causes such as pain, indigestion, breathlessness or itching. These may interfere with your sleep, but can often be treated without sleeping tablets.

Check with your doctor or pharmacist whether any other medicines you are taking are likely to cause sleep problems.

Use the 'Good sleep guide'. Copies are available from your GP practice and include helpful advice on how to get a good night's sleep. Good sleep patterns can take weeks to establish, but be confident and you will get there in the end.

IMPORTANT. Do not stop your sleeping tablet medication suddenly, as this may cause problems. It is not practical for everyone and you should discuss your case in detail with your doctor first.



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Patient Information Leaflet

Adapted from Welsh Medicines Partnership educational pack