

Sleep Disorder Pill Increases Risk of Overdose in Youths

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Young people prescribed benzodiazepines for a sleep disorder had a higher risk of overdose, and the risk was higher for those who were recently prescribed opioids
- › Benzodiazepines are one of the most widely prescribed drug classes. They are known to depress the central nervous system by bypassing the blood-brain barrier and affecting the inhibitory neurotransmitter GABA
- › Data show those taking hypnotic sleep aids, including benzodiazepines, barbiturates and sedative antihistamines, on a regular basis are significantly more likely to die over 2.5 years than nonusers
- › These types of dangerous drugs are prescribed and given to babies and toddlers, which the FDA says can cause psychosis, heart attack, diabetes and sudden death
- › There is drug-free help for many sleep disorders when the root problem is addressed, such as anxiety, depression or health issues like heart disease or lung disease. Consider addressing lifestyle factors and making these changes to your sleeping environment

A study¹ published in November 2022 in the journal JAMA found that young people who were prescribed benzodiazepines for a sleep disorder may be at higher risk for an overdose. Benzodiazepines, such as Xanax, are commonly prescribed to treat anxiety and insomnia.

Sleep plays a vital role in your overall health and empowers your body to recover from the stressors of the past day. According to a 2020 poll by the National Sleep

Foundation,² nearly half of all Americans say they feel sleepy during the day and 35.2% of adults reported sleeping less than seven hours each night.

One study recorded chronic insomnia in 33% of 278 patients sampled.³ According to the CDC, 57.8% of middle schoolers and 72.7% of high schoolers report getting less than the recommended amount of sleep for their age group.⁴ While not each of these statistics is the result of a sleep disorder, it's apparent that much of the U.S. is chronically sleep deprived.

Sleep Medication Has Higher Risk of Overdose in Teens

According to the CDC,⁵ 8.2% of people 18 years and older took medication to help them fall asleep four or more times in the week in which they were surveyed. The percentage rose as the age of the participants increased.

Researchers from Rutgers Institute for Health questioned whether benzodiazepines, used in the treatment of sleep and anxiety, were associated with an increased risk of overdose in young people compared to alternative pharmacological treatments such as trazodone, hydroxyzine and sedative-hypnotic Z-drugs.⁶

The researchers gathered information from 23,084 young people from ages 10 to 29 years who were prescribed benzodiazepines and compared the data against 66,706 individuals who were prescribed a comparative pharmacologic treatment.⁷ The information was gathered from a commercial claims database of privately insured individuals. The researchers then looked at the number of drug overdoses in the first 6 months after the participants started treatment.

They found benzodiazepines were associated with a higher risk of drug overdose when compared to alternative pharmacological treatments for sleep disorders. The data showed an even higher risk in young people who had a recent opioid prescription. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse,⁸ 12,290 deaths in 2020 involved benzodiazepines. This represented a significant increase from 6,872 in 2011 and 1,135 in 1999.

Greta Bushnell, an author of the study and assistant professor at the Rutgers School of Public Health, commented on the results of the study in a press release:⁹

"The risk of drug overdose with benzodiazepine treatment is an important safety consideration when treating adolescents and young adults. Given the frequent co-use of benzodiazepines with other substances ... because other substance use may be unknown to the prescriber, adolescents and young adults should be screened for substance use and a history of overdoses before treatment."

Don't Do This if You Can't Sleep

Benzodiazepines are one of the most widely prescribed drug classes¹⁰ and are known to depress the central nervous system by bypassing the blood-brain barrier and affecting the inhibitory neurotransmitter GABA.

In April 2019,¹¹ the FDA announced it would begin requiring sedative-hypnotic sleep medication to carry a black box warning stating the side effects could include dangerous behaviors. These include eating, walking, driving or engaging in a range of activities during sleep that could lead to injury or death.

During the past 26 years, the FDA¹² identified 66 documented reports of "complex sleep behaviors" occurring in patients on these drugs, 20 of which were fatal. The reports included accidental overdose, near drowning and drowning, car accidents when a sleeping patient was driving and unintentional suicide.

Researchers¹³ have shown a dose-dependent increase in the likelihood of death over 2.5 years in those regularly taking hypnotic sleep aids, including benzodiazepines, barbiturates and sedative antihistamines when compared to nonusers.

Even when individuals were prescribed and took less than 18 pills each year, they had a greater than threefold increased risk of death. Individuals who took greater than 132 doses in a year were 5.36 times more likely to die. Heavy use was also associated with a significant elevation in the incidence of cancer.

Several other studies have reached similar conclusions. A 2009 study¹⁴ followed 3,523 men and women and found regular use of hypnotics increased all-cause mortality. A 2010 study¹⁵ of 14,117 people found those who took sleeping pills were 1.36 times more likely to die than nonusers. Finally, a 2015 study¹⁶ found those who reported any use of sleep medication had a twofold risk of all-cause mortality, and the risk associated with benzodiazepines was greater.

Hundreds of Thousands of Toddlers on Psychiatric Drugs

Unfortunately, these dangerous drugs are prescribed and given to children even younger than the 10-year-olds in the featured study. It is unfathomable that infants who cannot walk or talk end up on addictive and mind-altering anti-anxiety medications and antidepressants. Even if parents ask for medication they see advertised on television, why do pediatricians prescribe them to babies?

Exposure to dangerous medication starts even before birth. A vast majority of adults are prescribed antidepressant drugs, despite the fact there's little evidence to suggest they provide meaningful help, and mounting evidence to show patients experience greater harm than they are being told.

A 2017 study¹⁷ demonstrated that out of 242 million U.S. adults in 2013, 12% had filled one or more prescriptions for an antidepressant and 8.3% for an anxiolytic such as benzodiazepine. By 2022,¹⁸ 28 states reported an increase in mental health prescription drugs from 10% to 50% and recorded nearly 1 in 4 of all Americans on a prescription mental health drug.

A study in 2013 found "In utero exposure to both SSRIs and nonselective monoamine reuptake inhibitors (tricyclic antidepressants) was associated with an increased risk of autism spectrum disorders, particularly without intellectual disability."¹⁹

Children's exposure to antidepressants and other psychiatric drugs does not end after birth. In 2014,²⁰ the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, a mental health watchdog group, highlighted data on children that showed shocking figures.

- 274,000 babies aged 1 and younger were given psychiatric drugs — Of these, 249,699 were on anti-anxiety meds like Xanax; 26,406 were on antidepressants such as Prozac or Paxil, 1,422 were on ADHD drugs such as Ritalin and Adderall, and 654 were on antipsychotics such as Risperdal and Zyprexa
- In the toddler category (2- to 3-year-olds), 318,997 were on anti-anxiety drugs, 46,102 were on antidepressants, 10,000 were prescribed ADHD drugs and 3,760 were on antipsychotics
- Among children aged 5 and younger, 1,080,168 were on psychiatric drugs

These figures are roughly 9 years old and were gathered before the pandemic. Chances are they are even higher today. Just what will happen to all these children as they grow up? Benzodiazepines are anti-anxiety drugs which "the FDA and international drug regulatory agencies cite side effects including, but not limited to, psychosis, mania, suicidal ideation, heart attack, stroke, diabetes and even sudden death."²¹

Even worse, research also shows children are increasingly prescribed medication off-label. The results of one study revealed that:²²

"Physicians ordered ≥ 1 off-label systemic drug at 18.5% of visits, usually (74.6%) because of unapproved conditions. Off-label ordering was most common proportionally in neonates (83%) and in absolute terms among adolescents (322 orders out of 1000 visits). Among common classes, off-label orders for antihistamines and several psychotropics increased over time ..."

Help for Anxiety and Sleep Problems Without Drugs

As with any health concern, it's vital to address the root problem and not just try to alleviate the symptoms. There are several causes²³ for sleep disorders, including depression and anxiety, medications and health conditions such as pain, heart disease and lung disease. In some cases, the cause of sleep disorders is unknown.

At other times lifestyle factors and things we eat or drink can contribute to sleep problems, such as caffeine and alcohol intake, or working the night shift. I have found

Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) an effective means of helping to control anxiety and insomnia. EFT helps by reducing the effect of stress and anxiety on your body, which can damage your mental and physical health.

Although brief periods of anxiety are a natural adaptive response to a potential threat, chronic anxiety can increase your risk of health problems. Additionally, there are specific EFT techniques designed for insomnia.²⁴

Although you cannot eliminate anxiety from your life entirely, tools such as EFT can help reduce your stress by correcting the bioelectrical dysregulation that happens when anxiety becomes chronic.²⁵

Another strategy that improves anxiety is supplementation with vitamin B6. According to a double-blind, placebo-controlled study²⁶ published in July 2022, high doses of vitamin B6 may be able to help reduce anxiety. The researchers engaged 478 university students and split them into two groups.

One group received 100 mg of vitamin B6 and the other received a placebo. The study measured the increase of the inhibitory neurotransmitter GABA — the same neurotransmitter affected by benzodiazepines — using EEG responses to specific visual stimuli. Data showed that supplementation lowered the students' self-reported levels of anxiety and showed a trend toward reducing depression as well.

The researchers wrote that²⁷ "... the pattern of results produced by vitamin B6 supplementation in this visual paradigm is the same as that produced by the GABA agonist alprazolam." This is a class of benzodiazepines used to treat anxiety disorders.²⁸

The benefits of using sleeping pills are negligible and benzodiazepine can increase the potential risk of overdose and early death. Yet, small lifestyle adjustments can go a long way toward ensuring an uninterrupted and restful night of sleep. Consider the following suggestions that are fully explained in "[Perhaps the Worst Thing to do if You Can't Sleep](#)."

Optimize light exposure during the day and minimize light exposure after sunset	Address mental states that can prevent a peaceful sleep, such as anxiety and anger
Keep the temperature in your bedroom below 70° Fahrenheit	Avoid watching television or using electronic devices in the evening for at least one hour before going to bed
Take a hot bath 90 to 120 minutes before bedtime to help raise your core body temperature	Minimize electromagnetic fields (EMFs) in your bedroom
Develop a relaxing presleep routine	Avoid alcohol, caffeine, nicotine and other drugs

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