



Anxiety Medication

What You Need to Know About Benzodiazepines & Other Anxiety Drugs



When you're overwhelmed by heart-pounding panic, paralyzed by fear, or exhausted from yet another sleepless night spent worrying, you'll do just about anything to get relief. And there's no question that when anxiety is disabling, medication may help. But are drugs always the best answer? Is there solid evidence that they're beneficial in the long run? Just what are the safety concerns and potential side effects? And are there any truly effective non-drug options? These are some of the important questions you'll need to consider when deciding if anxiety medication is right for you. The answers may surprise you.

The role of medication in anxiety treatment

Many different types of medications are used in the treatment of anxiety disorders, including traditional anti-anxiety drugs such as benzodiazepines (typically prescribed for short-term use) and newer options like SSRI antidepressants (often recommended as a long-term anxiety solution). These drugs can provide temporary relief, but they also come with side effects and safety concerns—some significant.

They are also not a cure. In fact, there are many questions about their long-term effectiveness. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, benzodiazepines lose their therapeutic anti-anxiety effect after 4 to 6 months of regular use. And a recent [analysis reported in *JAMA Psychiatry*](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25806940) (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25806940) found that the effectiveness of SSRIs in treating anxiety has been overestimated, and in some cases is no better than placebo.

What's more, it can be very difficult to get off anxiety medications without difficult withdrawals, including rebound anxiety that can be worse than your original problem.

I need relief, and I need it now!

So where does that leave you if you're suffering? Even when anxiety relief comes with side effects and dangers, that can still sound like a fair trade when panic and fear are ruling your life.

The bottom line is that there's a time and place for anxiety medication. If you have severe anxiety that's interfering with your ability to function, medication may be helpful—especially as a short-term treatment. However, many people use anti-anxiety medication when therapy, exercise, or other self-help strategies would work just as well or better, minus the drawbacks.

Anxiety medications can ease symptoms, but they're not right for everyone and they're not the only answer. It's up to you to evaluate your options and decide what's best for you.

Benzodiazepines for anxiety

Types of benzodiazepines

Xanax (alprazolam)

Klonopin (clonazepam)

Valium (diazepam)

Ativan (lorazepam)

Benzodiazepines (also known as tranquilizers) are the most widely prescribed type of medication for anxiety. Because they work quickly—typically bringing relief within 30 minutes to an hour—they're very effective when taken during a panic attack or another overwhelming anxiety episode. However, they are physically addictive and not recommended for long-term treatment.

Benzodiazepines work by slowing down the nervous system, helping you relax both physically and mentally. But it can also lead to unwanted side effects. The higher the dose, the more intense these side effects typically are. However, some people feel sleepy, foggy, and uncoordinated even on low doses, which can cause problems with work, school, or everyday activities such as driving. The medication hangover can last into the next day.

Common side effects of benzodiazepines include:

- Drowsiness
- Dizziness
- Poor balance or coordination
- Slurred speech
- Trouble concentrating

- Memory problems
- Confusion
- Stomach upset
- Headache
- Blurred vision

Benzodiazepines can make depression worse

According to the FDA, benzodiazepines can worsen cases of pre-existing depression, and more recent studies suggest that they may potentially lead to treatment-resistant depression. Furthermore, benzodiazepines can cause emotional blunting or numbness and increase suicidal thoughts and feelings.

Benzodiazepine safety concerns

Drug dependence and withdrawal

When taken regularly, benzodiazepines lead to physical dependence and tolerance, with increasingly larger doses needed to get the same anxiety relief as before. This happens quickly—usually within a couple of months, but sometimes in as little as a few weeks. If you abruptly stop taking your medication, you may experience severe withdrawal symptoms such as:

- ▶ **Increased anxiety**, restlessness, shaking
- ▶ **Insomnia**, confusion, stomach pain
- ▶ **Depression**, confusion, panic attacks

- ▶ **Pounding heart**, sweating, and in severe cases, seizure

Many people mistake withdrawal symptoms for a return of their original anxiety condition, making them think they need to restart the medication. Gradually tapering off the drug will help minimize the withdrawal reaction.

Drug interactions and overdose

While benzodiazepines are relatively safe when taken only occasionally and in small doses, they can be dangerous and even deadly when combined with other central nervous system depressants. Always talk to your doctor or pharmacist before combining medications.

Don't drink on benzodiazepines. When mixed with alcohol, benzodiazepines can lead to fatal overdose.

Don't mix with painkillers or sleeping pills. Taking benzodiazepines with prescription pain or sleeping pills can also lead to fatal overdose.

Antihistamines amplify their effects. Antihistamines—found in many over-the-counter sleep, cold, and allergy medicines—are sedating on their own. Be cautious when mixing with benzodiazepines to avoid over-sedation.

Be cautious when combining with antidepressants. SSRIs such as Prozac and Zoloft can heighten benzodiazepine toxicity. You may need to adjust your dose accordingly.

Paradoxical effects of benzodiazepines

The benzodiazepines work because they slow down the nervous system. But sometimes, for reasons that aren't well understood, they have the opposite effect. Paradoxical reactions are most common in children, the elderly, and people with developmental disabilities. They include:

- ▶ **Increased anxiety**, irritability, agitation, aggression, and rage
- ▶ **Mania**, impulsive behavior, and hallucinations

Special benzodiazepine risk factors

Anyone who takes benzodiazepines can experience unpleasant or dangerous side effects. But certain individuals are at a higher risk:

People over 65. Older adults are more sensitive to the sedating effects of benzodiazepines. Even small doses can cause confusion, amnesia, loss of balance, and cognitive impairment that looks like dementia. Benzodiazepine use in the elderly is associated with an increased risk of falls, broken hips and legs, and car accidents. Long-term benzodiazepine use also increases the risk of Alzheimer’s disease and dementia.

People with a history of substance abuse. Because they’re physically addicting and on their own and dangerous when combined with alcohol and other drugs, anyone with a current or former substance abuse problem should use benzodiazepines only with extreme caution.

Pregnant and breastfeeding women. Benzodiazepine use during pregnancy can lead to dependence in the developing baby, with withdrawal following birth. Benzodiazepines are also excreted in breast milk. Therefore, pregnant women need to have a thorough discussion about the risks and benefits of these medications with their prescribing doctor. If medication is necessary, the goal is the smallest effective dose.

The connection between benzodiazepines and accidents

Benzodiazepines cause drowsiness and poor coordination, which increases your risk for accidents at home, at work, and on the road. When on benzodiazepines, be very careful when driving, operating machinery, or doing anything else that requires physical coordination.

SSRI antidepressants for anxiety

Many medications originally approved for the treatment of depression are also prescribed for anxiety. In comparison to benzodiazepines, the risk for dependency and abuse is smaller. However, antidepressants take up to 4 to 6 weeks to begin relieving anxiety symptoms, so they can’t be taken “as needed.” Their use is limited to chronic anxiety problems that require ongoing treatment.

The [antidepressants](/articles/depression/antidepressant-medication.htm) (/articles/depression/antidepressant-medication.htm) most widely prescribed for anxiety are SSRIs such as Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, Lexapro, and Celexa. SSRIs have been used to treat generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Common side effects of SSRIs include:

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Agitation
- Drowsiness
- Weight gain
- Diarrhea

- Insomnia
- Sexual dysfunction
- Nervousness
- Headaches
- Dry mouth
- Increased sweating

SSRI withdrawal

Although physical dependence is not as quick to develop with antidepressants, withdrawal can still be an issue. If discontinued too quickly, antidepressant withdrawal can trigger symptoms such as extreme depression and fatigue, irritability, anxiety, flu-like symptoms, and insomnia.

Antidepressant medication and suicide risk

Antidepressants can make depression worse rather than better for some people, leading to an increased risk of suicide, hostility, and even homicidal behavior. While this is particularly true of children and young adults, anyone taking antidepressants should be closely watched. Monitoring is especially important if this is the person's first time on depression medication or if the dose has recently been changed.

Signs that medication is making things worse include anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, hostility, restlessness, and extreme agitation—particularly if the symptoms appear suddenly or rapidly deteriorate. If you spot the warning signs in yourself or a loved one, contact a doctor or therapist immediately.

If you are concerned that a friend or family member is contemplating suicide, see [Suicide Prevention](/articles/suicide-prevention/suicide-prevention.htm) (/articles/suicide-prevention/suicide-prevention.htm). The suicide risk is greatest during the first two months of antidepressant treatment.

Other types of medication for anxiety

Buspirone (BuSpar)

Buspirone, also known by the brand name BuSpar, is a newer anti-anxiety drug that acts as a mild tranquilizer. Buspirone relieves anxiety by increasing serotonin in the brain—as the SSRIs do—and decreasing dopamine. Compared to benzodiazepines, buspirone is slow acting—taking about two weeks to start working. However, it's not as sedating, it doesn't impair memory and coordination, and the withdrawal effects are minimal.

Since the risk of dependence is low and it has no serious drug interactions, buspirone is a better option for older individuals and people with a history of substance abuse. However, its effectiveness is limited. It works for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), but doesn't seem to help other types of anxiety disorders.

Common side effects of buspirone include:

- Nausea
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Drowsiness
- Weight gain
- Upset stomach
- Constipation
- Nervousness
- Diarrhea
- Dry mouth

Beta blockers

Beta blockers—including drugs such as propranolol (Inderal) and atenolol (Tenormin)—are a type of medication used to treat high blood pressure and heart problems. However, they are also prescribed off-label for anxiety. Beta blockers work by blocking the effects of norepinephrine, a stress hormone involved in the fight-or-flight response. This helps control the physical symptoms of anxiety such as rapid heart rate, a trembling voice, sweating, dizziness, and shaky hands.

Because beta blockers don't affect the emotional symptoms of anxiety such as worry, they're most helpful for phobias, particularly [social phobia and performance anxiety \(/articles/anxiety/social-anxiety-disorder.htm\)](#). If you're anticipating a specific anxiety-producing situation (such as giving a speech), taking a beta blocker in advance can help reduce your "nerves."

Common side effects of beta blockers include:

- Dizziness
- Sleepiness
- Weakness
- Fatigue

- Nausea
- Headache
- Constipation
- Diarrhea

Medication isn't your only option for anxiety relief

Anxiety medication won't solve your problems if you're anxious because of mounting bills, a tendency to jump to "worst-case scenarios", or an unhealthy relationship. That's where self-help, therapy, and other lifestyle changes come in. These non-drug treatments can produce lasting changes and long-term relief.

Exercise – [Exercise \(/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm\)](#) is a powerful anxiety treatment. Studies show that regular workouts can ease symptoms just as effectively as medication.

Worry busting strategies – You can train your brain to [stop worrying \(/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm\)](#) and look at life from a more calm and balanced perspective.

Therapy – Cognitive behavioral [therapy \(/articles/anxiety/therapy-for-anxiety-disorders.htm\)](#) can teach you how to control your anxiety levels, stop worrisome thoughts, and conquer your fears.

Yoga and tai chi – [Yoga and tai chi \(/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm#yoga\)](#) are mind-body interventions that engage you emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Data has shown their efficacy for many different medical conditions, including anxiety.

Mindfulness and meditation – [Mindfulness](/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm) (/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm) is a state of mind where you learn to observe your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a present, compassionate, and non-judgmental way. It often brings a sense of calm and relaxation.

Deciding if anxiety medication is right for you

If you're trying to decide whether or not to treat your anxiety with medication, it's important to weigh the pros and cons in conjunction with your doctor. It's also important to learn about the common side effects of the anxiety medication you are considering. Side effects of anxiety medication range from mild nuisances such as dry mouth to more severe problems such as acute nausea or pronounced weight gain. For any anxiety medication, you will have to balance the side effects against the benefits.

Questions to ask yourself and a mental health professional

- ▶ Is medication the best option for my anxiety problem?
- ▶ Am I willing to put up with unpleasant side effects in return for anxiety relief?
- ▶ What non-drug treatments for anxiety might help?
- ▶ Do I have the time and am I willing to pursue non-drug treatments such as cognitive-behavioral therapy?
- ▶ What self-help strategies might help me get my anxiety under control?
- ▶ If I decide to take anxiety medication, should I pursue other therapy as well?
- ▶ Is anxiety really my problem? Or is something else going on, such as an underlying health condition or pain, for example?

Questions to ask your doctor

- ▶ How will the medication help my anxiety?
- ▶ What are the drug's common side effects?
- ▶ Are there any food and drinks I will need to avoid?
- ▶ How will this drug interact with my other prescriptions?
- ▶ How long will I have to take the anxiety medication?
- ▶ Will withdrawing from the medication be difficult?
- ▶ Will my anxiety return when I stop taking the medication?

More help for anxiety

[Therapy for Anxiety Disorders: \(/articles/anxiety/therapy-for-anxiety-disorders.htm\)](/articles/anxiety/therapy-for-anxiety-disorders.htm) Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Exposure Therapy, and Other Options

[How to Stop Worrying: \(/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm\)](/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm) Self-Help Strategies for Anxiety Relief

[Anxiety Disorders and Anxiety Attacks: \(/articles/anxiety/anxiety-disorders-and-anxiety-attacks.htm\)](/articles/anxiety/anxiety-disorders-and-anxiety-attacks.htm) Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms and Getting Help

[Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder: \(/articles/anxiety/panic-attacks-and-panic-disorders.htm\)](/articles/anxiety/panic-attacks-and-panic-disorders.htm) Symptoms, Treatment, and Tips for Overcoming Panic

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