

Provider Education: Benzodiazepine Withdrawal

Withdrawal symptoms can occur when discontinuing or reducing the dose of benzodiazepine therapy. It is more likely to occur in patients that have been on chronic daily therapy, when higher doses are used, when tapering short-acting agents, and when abrupt discontinuation occurs.

Onset of Withdrawal^{1,2}

- Short-acting benzodiazepines:
Within two days of discontinuation
- Long-acting benzodiazepines:
Up to 8 days after discontinuation

Duration¹

- Symptoms can persist for days to weeks
- Some patients may have symptoms that take months to resolve

Symptoms^{1,2}

- Common: anxiety, agitation, insomnia, restlessness, muscle tension, irritability, fatigue
- Less common: nausea, diarrhea, anorexia, malaise, blurred vision, sweating, fever, tinnitus, nightmares, delusions, hallucinations, delirium, tachycardia, hypertension, tremor and seizures
- Factors that increase risk for withdrawal seizures: high doses, long durations of therapy, concurrent ingestion of drugs that lower the seizure threshold, more common in benzodiazepines with short half-lives

Scales to Monitor Benzodiazepine Withdrawal^{3,4}

- Benzodiazepine Withdrawal Symptom Questionnaire (BWSQ)
 - 20 item scale (self-reported)
 - Score 0-40 (higher the score, the more severe the withdrawal)
- Clinical Withdrawal Assessment Scale for Benzodiazepines (CIWA-B)
 - 20 item scale (17 items self-reported, 3 observational)
 - Score 0-80 (higher the score, the more severe the withdrawal)

Benzodiazepine Half Life Table²

| Half-Life | Generic Name |
|--------------|--|
| Short-Acting | Triazolam, midazolam |
| Intermediate | Alprazolam, lorazepam, oxazepam, temazepam |
| Long-Acting | Chlordiazepoxide, clonazepam, clorazepate, diazepam, estazolam, flurazepam, quazepam |

*Note: Table is not a complete listing of all benzodiazepine drugs

Resources:

1. Bostwick, JR. "Anxiety and Anxiety-related Disorders." 2018-2019 Psychiatric Pharmacotherapy Review. College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists, 2019.
2. Magellan Health. Ambulatory Intoxication and Withdrawal Management: A Clinical Monograph. 2016
3. Couvee J, Zitman F. The Benzodiazepine Withdrawal Symptom Questionnaire: psychometric evaluation during a discontinuation program in depressed chronic benzodiazepine users in general practice. *Addiction*. 2002 Mar;97(3):337-45. PMID: 11964110
4. Busto UE, Sykora K, Sellers EM. A clinical scale to assess benzodiazepine withdrawal. *J Clin Psychopharmacol*. 1989 Dec;9(6):412-6. PMID: 257419