

Do You Take Both Opioids and Benzodiazepines?

Please read this important information if you are taking an opioid and a benzodiazepine.

Common examples of opioids and benzodiazepines:

Opioids (medicines for pain):

- fentanyl (Actiq®)
- hydrocodone (Vicodin®)
- oxycodone (Percocet®, Oxycontin®)
- morphine (MS Contin®)

Benzodiazepines (medicines for anxiety or sleep):

- alprazolam (Xanax®)
- clonazepam (Klonopin®)
- diazepam (Valium®)
- lorazepam (Ativan®)



Do you know what is **TRUE** and **FALSE** about the risks of taking opioids and benzodiazepines together? **Let us test what you know.**



- 1 I always take my opioid and benzodiazepine medicines as prescribed. I am not at risk for an accidental overdose.
TRUE or **FALSE**
- 2 Only people addicted to medicines can overdose.
TRUE or **FALSE**
- 3 Certain medical problems or use of alcohol add more risk for an accidental overdose.
TRUE or **FALSE**
- 4 I have been taking an opioid and benzodiazepine for years. I am not at risk for an accidental overdose.
TRUE or **FALSE**

Why is combining an opioid and a benzodiazepine so dangerous?

Opioids used with benzodiazepines can stop your breathing and lead to an accidental overdose.

What is an accidental overdose?

- An overdose is when your body has too much of a medicine or substance.
- An overdose is accidental when you did not know the amount of medicine or substance was going to be too much.
- This can lead to death in some cases.
- Naloxone can be used to reverse an accidental overdose.

In the U.S. in 2020, every day
255 people died from a
drug overdose*



*Includes prescription medicines and illicit/street drugs. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>. Accessed July 18, 2021.

What is naloxone?

- Naloxone is an important part of opioid safety and is used in an emergency. It can help you start breathing again by temporarily reversing the effects of opioids during an overdose.
- Keeping naloxone on hand reduces your risk of death from an opioid overdose. Emergency personnel carry naloxone but it can take time for them to reach you.
- The VA provides naloxone to Veterans who are receiving medicines or using substances that may place them at risk for an overdose.



Please click here or scan the QR code to link to videos and learn more about naloxone:

Check your answers!

- 1 FALSE.** Even when used as prescribed, taking opioids and benzodiazepines together can cause an overdose. Ask a healthcare provider about your risks and if there are safer medicines you can take.
- 2 FALSE.** Any patient taking an opioid with a benzodiazepine is at risk for an overdose. Remember, it is the medicine combination that is dangerous, not the person who takes it.
- 3 TRUE.** Anyone is at risk for an accidental overdose when taking opioids and benzodiazepines. Alcohol use, sleep apnea, lung or liver disease and other conditions can further increase your risk.
- 4 FALSE.** This medicine combination always comes with some risks, no matter how long you have been taking it. Your risks may increase as you age. It is important that you and your healthcare provider continue to talk about the risks and benefits of your medicines.

Did you know?

The risk of an accidental overdose can happen with any dose, large or small. No matter how long you have been taking these medicines, you can be at risk for harm. **Risks increase if you:**

- are older in age
- have certain medical conditions like sleep apnea, lung conditions, or reduced kidney or liver function
- drink alcohol, or smoke cigarettes or cannabis

When you are taking opioids and/or benzodiazepines every day you develop a tolerance, which means your body becomes used to the medicines. If you stop taking them, you can lose the tolerance. If you later restart the medicines, it may be too much and can cause an overdose.

What can you do?

- ✓ Talk to your healthcare provider about the risks and benefits of your medicines.
- ✓ Ask if there are safer medicines for you.
- ✓ Find out if there are ways to reduce your risk of an accidental overdose.
- ✓ Ask if naloxone is right for you.



It is important that you do not stop taking your medicines without talking to your provider or healthcare team first. Stopping medicines like benzodiazepines too quickly can be dangerous.



The Veterans Crisis Line also offers free, confidential support and crisis intervention 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. **To reach the crisis line, call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1.**