



# THE BASICS

## Tranquillizers & Sleeping Pills

### *Do you know?*

- Tranquillizers are prescribed to help people feel calm when they are experiencing anxiety or tension. Sleeping pills are prescribed to people who have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep. Both tranquillizers and sleeping pills are part of a group of drugs called depressants. This means they slow down activity in the brain. Alcohol is another common example of a depressant.
- Tranquillizers and sleeping pills work very well for people who take them under the direction of a doctor for short periods of time. However, because they create a feeling of calm and well-being, both types of drugs can also be abused. These types of drugs are usually abused along with other drugs. For example, they are often used together with alcohol. When abused, they are usually swallowed or injected.
- Common street names for prescription tranquillizers and sleeping pills are Quaaludes®, Xanax®, Valium®, Nembutal®, “tranks,” “reds,” “yellows,” “blues,” “ludes,” “barbs,” “downers” and “Vs” (Valium).

### *Short-term Effects*

Prescription tranquillizers and sleeping pills can cause a sense of well-being, relaxation or sleepiness. Because they slow down the way the brain works, use of these drugs may also result in slurred speech, shallow breathing, a feeling of moving slowly, feeling tired, disorientation, lack of coordination and/or dilated pupils.

Higher doses cause short term memory problems, lack of good judgment and loss of physical coordination. Feeling irritable, paranoid and even suicidal are also potential reactions to high doses. Some people experience an opposite reaction to these drugs, and as a result, can become agitated or aggressive.

### *Long-term Effects*

Long-term use of these drugs, whether under the care of a doctor or through illegal use, can result in memory problems, confusion and reduced physical coordination. As well, people may feel depressed, and as a result, their physical and mental health may suffer.

If people use tranquillizers or sleeping pills for a long time, they also need to be very cautious about how they stop taking the drugs. If they stop suddenly, serious withdrawal symptoms may occur. Symptoms of withdrawal after long term use will generally create feelings that are the opposite of how they felt while taking the drugs. This is known as a rebound effect. For example, rather than feeling relaxed or sleepy, they may feel agitated, anxious or unable to sleep. This could also result in seizures or other harmful events.

### *Tolerance & Dependence*

- Regular users of tranquillizers and sleeping pills can develop powerful psychological dependence (they feel they need it) and physical dependence (the body needs it). Addiction can also occur, meaning users continue to take these drugs despite harmful consequences.
- Tolerance (the need for more of the drug to get the desired effect) can also occur. This means larger doses are needed to achieve similar effects as those experienced when they first started taking the drug. This may lead users to take higher doses and risk an overdose.

### *Withdrawal Symptoms*

Withdrawal symptoms may include nausea, anxiety, increased heart rate, abdominal cramps, tremors or even seizures.

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Professional supervised care is recommended for anyone wishing to stop using tranquillizers and/or sleeping pills after using them for a long period of time. If severe withdrawal symptoms are experienced, consult a medical professional immediately.

## Other Risks

- These types of drugs are very dangerous if combined with other medicine or substances (i.e. alcohol) that cause drowsiness, including prescription pain medicines and some over-the-counter cold and allergy medications. If combined, they can slow both heart rate and breathing, which can be fatal.
- Abuse of tranquillizers and/or sleeping pills can result in personality disturbances, learning problems, loss of memory and mental health problems.
- Abuse of any prescription drug can lead to violence and crime. People may also commit crimes to make money to buy drugs, or they may sell the drugs illegally. As a result, a person may be fined or receive a prison sentence and a criminal record.
- Buying prescription drugs is expensive when the drugs are purchased illegally on the street.
- Using tranquillizers or sleeping pills during pregnancy and breastfeeding may increase the risk of:
  - the baby being born dependent on the drug. The withdrawal these babies experience after they are born can result in muscle spasms, irritability, high-pitched crying, diarrhea, disturbed sleep and feeding, vomiting, stuffy nose, sneezing and breathing problems.
  - the fetus becoming infected if a mother uses needles and contracts human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) or hepatitis B or C.
  - the baby becoming dependent on the drug as these drugs are passed into breast milk.
- People can put themselves in risky situations when on this drug because they are not able to think clearly and their physical coordination may be reduced (driving while high, having unprotected sex, taking unsafe actions which could cause injury to themselves or others).

- Sharing needles can lead to infections, such as HIV and hepatitis.
- When not prescribed by a doctor, the user may not be aware of the signs of an allergic reaction so would not know to seek medical attention. Dangerous allergic reactions could occur, possibly leading to death.

## Substance Use & Mental Health

Substance use and mental health problems can often occur together. This is commonly referred to as a co-occurring disorder.

- Substance use may increase the risk of mental health problems.
- People with mental health problems are at higher risk of developing substance abuse problems:
  - Sometimes they use alcohol and other drugs in an attempt to relieve themselves from mental health symptoms.
  - For most people alcohol and other substance use only covers up the symptoms and may make them worse.

**REMEMBER:** A person's experience with any drug can vary. Here are a few of the many things that may affect the experience: the amount and strength of the drug taken, the setting, a person's mood and expectations before taking the drug, gender, overall health, past experience with that drug and whether more than one drug is being used at the same time. Using alcohol and other drugs at the same time can also be dangerous.

### Sources and For More Information

*Straight Facts About Drugs and Drug Abuse*, Health Canada, 2000.

*Fast Facts on Drugs*, AFM, 2004.

Alberta Health Services Website:  
[www.albertahealthservices.ca](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca)

*Benzodiazepines: How They Work and How to Withdraw* (The Ashton Manual): <http://benzo.org.uk/manual/index.htm>

*The Partnership for a Drug-free America Website*:  
<http://www.drugfree.org>

*Addiction Help Line Website*:

[http://www.addiction-help-line.com/cns\\_depressants.html](http://www.addiction-help-line.com/cns_depressants.html)

*National Institute on Drug Abuse Website*:  
[www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

**The Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM)** offers a broad range of prevention and treatment services for alcohol, other drugs and gambling. These are designed to meet the needs of all Manitobans and include harm reduction and abstinence-based programs.

**For more information**, contact your local AFM office or visit the website at [www.afm.mb.ca](http://www.afm.mb.ca).

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