

Tom's story

// I'd been taking Valium for ages. It started with a few scripts to help with sleeping back when I was working night shift, but I started needing to use more, then I found I couldn't get through the day without it. Then I started with Xanax. I don't think my doctor knew what to do about it, but he told me I needed to start coming off it and do a withdrawal. It took me a while to get my head around needing drug treatment, but my doctor sent me to my local drug treatment service and they helped me do it safely. It's been rocky at times, but I'm doing better now and it's helped me to work on a couple of other issues too.

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Benzos

Getting

support

 **UnitingCare**

Re Gen

Getting started

Whatever your reasons for using benzodiazepines (benzos) or other prescription drugs, if you're taking them for more than a couple of weeks, you can expect to develop a tolerance (needing bigger amounts to feel the same effect) or dependence (not feeling 'normal' unless you take them). Even people who stick to the prescribed amount can find they develop tolerance or dependence. So what do you do when you feel like you might need some help?

Changing your benzo use

For a small number of people, withdrawing from benzos can be dangerous and can cause some serious short-term side effects. It's important to seek some medical advice before making changes to your benzo use, especially if you have been using them for a long time, or using a high dose.

It is estimated that around 40% of regular (for three months or more) benzo users will experience withdrawal symptoms when they reduce or stop their intake. The percentage jumps to 50-80% for people who have been using benzos regularly for six months or longer. Talking to your GP or your local alcohol and other drugs service will help you to assess the risks and develop the right treatment plan for you.



Withdrawing from benzos and other prescription medication

Withdrawal is the process of reversing dependence and getting your body used to functioning without benzos or other prescription medication. The best way to safely withdraw is to **stabilise, substitute & reduce** your dose in consultation with your GP and an alcohol and other drug treatment service.

Stabilise – Many people take different amounts of pills at different times of the day depending on when they feel they need them. The first step is to stabilise on a regular dose that you will take at the same time every day. This will help you feel more in control and will level out any withdrawal symptoms. The right dose and times when you should take it will be worked out between you and your support team.

Substitute – If you are taking different types of pills or a combination of shorter and longer acting ones, switch to a single long acting pill such as Diazepam (Valium). This will make it easier to start reducing your dose and minimise any withdrawal symptoms. You can talk to your GP about how the dose will be worked out to cover the different types of medication you have been taking.

Reduce – The final step is to reduce your dose gradually over weeks or months, with plenty of time to adjust to each reduction before moving on to the next.

Withdrawal symptoms

You may experience a range of withdrawal symptoms such as abdominal pain, nausea, anxiety, depression, breathing difficulties, heart palpitations, sensitivity to light and sound, insomnia, nightmares, lack of energy or co-ordination, aches and pains, restlessness, sweating, irritability, headaches or seizures.

You may also experience symptoms not listed above, or you may not experience any symptoms at all. However, given the potential seriousness of some symptoms, it's recommended you don't undertake withdrawal without support.

Tips for getting through withdrawal

- Drink plenty of water, herbal teas, juice or rehydration drinks and steer clear of greasy foods that may trigger nausea. Eat small healthy snacks and meals regularly throughout the day.
- Accept that sleep might be more difficult than normal – doing some gentle exercise during the day and some relaxation exercises before bed can help you to wind down and feel tired enough to sleep. Your doctor may also be able to provide medication or suggest herbal remedies.
- Avoid or cut down on your use of caffeine and nicotine, as these will make it harder to sleep.
- Go easy on yourself! Most people have good days and bad days during withdrawal. Expect to feel strong cravings at times, as well as mood swings, feeling overwhelmed and feeling like it's all just too hard. Try and surround yourself with people who understand what you're trying to do and who will be encouraging and supportive.
- Ask for help – If something doesn't feel right, don't suffer in silence. Chances are, what you're experiencing is a regular symptom of withdrawal, but it's always worth checking.

What comes after withdrawal?

Withdrawal is an essential part of the process but, on its own is no guarantee of ongoing success. Changing your thought processes and how you respond to different situations takes longer.

The more work you do on developing your skills to build on the changes you've made, and the stronger your support network is, the better you'll be at coping with the various challenges you'll face. Your alcohol and other drug worker will be able to help you identify the supports you already have in place and what you can do to provide yourself with the best chance of achieving your goals.