

Sedatives and Sleeping Pills: *Understanding the Risks*

What are they?

Sedatives and sleeping pills are central nervous system depressants — or medications that slow your brain activity. They're also sometimes called tranquilizers.

Examples of sedatives and sleeping pills include:

- Benzodiazepines (Xanax, Valium, Ativan, Klonopin, Halcion, ProSom, and Librium). On the street, these are sometimes called *candy*, *downers*, *sleeping pills*, or *"tranks."*
- Other sleeping pills (Ambien, Lunesta, Sonata).
- Barbiturates (Nembutal, Luminal Sodium, and Mebaral).

How are they used?

Sedatives and sleeping pills can be helpful for treating sleep problems, anxiety, acute stress reactions, or panic attacks. Barbiturates may also be prescribed to treat seizure disorders. **However, these medications carry risks, and unfortunately, they are often abused.** When abused, sedatives and sleeping pills can be as dangerous as "street" drugs. It's important to know the risks.

What are the risks?

- **Sedatives and sleeping pills interact dangerously with alcohol, opioids, prescription pain medications, and other drugs.** Mixing them with these substances slows your heart rate and breathing. This can cause **overdose or death**, even the first time you take them together.
- **Sedatives and sleeping pills can cause serious side effects**, including difficulty breathing, slurred speech, poor concentration and memory, confusion, dizziness, blurred vision, lack of coordination, slow pulse, nausea, headaches, and unsteady gait.

- **Sedatives and sleeping pills can impair your ability to operate a vehicle safely.** It is illegal to drive under the influence of a medication that makes you incapable of operating a vehicle.
- **If you use sedatives or sleeping pills over a long period of time, you can develop a tolerance.** This means you need more and more of the drugs to get the same effect. They may stop working all together. So, even if you take them, you may still have sleep problems or anxiety.
- **If you stop taking them suddenly, you can have severe withdrawal symptoms.** Withdrawal symptoms include seizures, anxiety, panic attacks, tremors, nausea, and other problems. Stopping barbiturates suddenly can kill you. You need a trained healthcare provider to help you stop using safely.
- **You could become addicted.**
 - **Abuse** is when you take medication without a prescription, in a way other than prescribed, or in order to get high.
 - **Addiction** is when you seek out and use drugs compulsively, even when they're causing serious problems in your life.

Learn more, get support

- Access information and resources:
National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)
www.drugabuse.gov
- Locate treatment programs in your area:
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov