

Globe Town Practice Policy for the Use of Benzodiazepine (and related Z medications)

Updated January 2018

Benzodiazepines (e.g. Diazepam/Lorazepam/Temazepam/Alprazolam/Clonazepam) have been in use since the 1960s for treatment of a wide range of conditions including:

Alcohol withdrawal

Agitation and restlessness

Anxiety

Epilepsy and seizures

Neurological disorders

Muscle spasms

Psychiatric disorders

Sleep disturbance

Initial use of benzodiazepines, including the well-known 'Valium', was enthusiastic and they were hailed as a wonder drug. However, it became increasingly clear that, as well as having short term deleterious effects on memory, co-ordination, concentration and reaction times, they were also addictive if used for a long time, with withdrawal leading to fits, hallucinations, agitation and confusion, and further had long term effects on cognition and balance.

Unfortunately benzodiazepines have also become a widely used drug of abuse since they first came on the market. Because of these reasons the use of benzodiazepines has been a lot more controlled around the world since the 1980-1990s, especially in the UK. Diazepam in the UK is a Class C/Schedule IV controlled drug.

In response to a recent significant event at the practice, and to provide some clarity to patients we have produced the following short guide:

Alcohol Withdrawal

- Can be used but has to be prescribed by and under the auspices of a specialist drug withdrawal team. We do not prescribe for this because it needs careful follow up and ongoing review as part of a detailed, supportive plan for withdrawal management

Flight anxiety

- The British National Formulary, the reference guide for prescription of medications by doctors in the UK, states that *"the use of benzodiazepines to treat short-term 'mild' anxiety is inappropriate"*.
- There are also concerns about paradoxical agitation, in which a person taking a benzodiazepine becomes unexpectedly more agitated and violent, which can pose a risk on

the plane. A similar effect can be seen with alcohol, which has led to people being removed from flights.

- Although plane emergencies are a rare occurrence there are also concerns about reduced awareness and reaction times for patients taking Benzodiazepine as this could pose a risk in the event of an emergency on board necessitating evacuation.
- Furthermore a study published in 1997 from the Stanford University School of Medicine **(1)** showed that there is evidence use of Benzodiazepines stops the normal adjustment response that would gradually lessen anxiety over time and therefore perpetuates and may increase anxiety in the long term, especially if used repeatedly.
- *Given the above we will no longer be providing Diazepam for flight anxiety and instead suggest the below aviation industry recommended flight anxiety courses.*

British Airways

<https://www.britishairways.com/en-gb/information/travel-assistance/flying-with-confidence>

Virgin Airways

<https://www.flyingwithoutfear.co.uk/>

- Flight anxiety does not come under the remit of General Medical Services as defined in the GP contract and so we are not obliged to prescribe for this.
- Patients who still wish to take benzodiazepines for flight anxiety are advised to consult with a private GP or travel clinic.

Acute muscle spasm

- Short term prescriptions may be given for anywhere from 1-5 days to in conjunction with pain killers +/- physiotherapy. Prescriptions will not be given for longer than this as the mainstay of therapy is treating the underlying condition and any pain arising from this.

Acute anxiety/sleep disturbance

- Short term prescriptions may be given at times of major upheaval for severe, disabling symptoms but these will not in general be for more than one week. Furthermore, any patients on long term prescriptions should expect to be reviewed and have a reduction and withdrawal plan made with them with the support of our substance misuse services RESET and the Specialist Addiction Unit (SAU).

Neurological disorders (including epilepsy)

- Only at instigation of neurologist and will not be able given in GP surgery without express plan for this

Psychiatric disorders

- For short term use only, at instigation of psychiatrist and will not be given in GP surgery without express plan for this.

(1) Acute and delayed effects of Alprazolam on flight phobics during exposure

Behav Res Ther. 1997 Sep;35(9):831-41.