

Tranquillizers and sleeping pills

What are tranquillizers and sleeping pills?

These drugs belong to a larger group of substances known as the sedative-hypnotics, which slow down or “sedate” the central nervous system (the brain, and spinal cord). This affects thinking, feeling, and body movement and function. Alcohol is a sedative, although we don’t often think of it that way (see the ABCs of Alcohol). Diazepam (Valium®) is one example of a tranquillizer.

In large doses, tranquillizers can make you sleep or become unconscious, just like sleeping pills can. In normal doses, tranquillizers make you feel calm, and they are prescribed to treat anxiety.

Some tranquillizers and sleeping pills have been linked to “date rape.” Criminals have dropped these drugs into people’s drinks so that they will not fight against being raped. Victims get drowsy, dizzy, and confused. They may even black out. To avoid becoming a victim, stay aware of your environment and never leave your drink unattended.

If you need to take tranquillizers or sleeping pills, use them for a short time only. In the long term, there are better ways to deal with stress and sleeplessness. Some of these are: exercise, biofeedback, relaxation techniques and counselling.

Short-term effects

The short-term effects of tranquillizers and sleeping pills include relaxation, drowsiness, reduced tension and feelings of well-being. It is dangerous to drive a vehicle while using these drugs.

Never combine these drugs with alcohol. The depressant effects of alcohol are added on to the depressant effects of the tranquillizers or sleeping pills. You may have trouble breathing, and may go into a coma or die.

Long-term effects

With long-term use, you may have problems with memory and judgment. Your muscles may get weak, and you can become confused and disoriented.

If a pregnant woman takes sleeping pills and tranquillizers, they will enter the blood of the developing fetus. There is a higher risk that the fetus

will have birth defects such as a cleft palate. Always check with a doctor before you take drugs during pregnancy.

Tranquillizers, sleeping pills and addiction

Tolerance is the body adapting to the presence of a drug. When tolerance to a drug increases, more of the drug is necessary to achieve the same effect. Users of tranquillizers and sleeping pills soon develop tolerance to the calming effects of these drugs. In contrast, there is usually no tolerance to the harmful effects: more drug produces more harm. When tolerance builds, it is dangerous to continue using the drug.

If you have developed tolerance to tranquillizers or sleeping pills, talk to your doctor before you quit taking the drugs. Withdrawal symptoms may include nausea, anxiety, increased heart rate, abdominal cramps, tremors or even seizures.