



What are Depressants?

Historically, people of almost every culture have used chemical agents to induce sleep, relieve stress, and alleviate anxiety. While alcohol is one of the oldest agents used for these purposes, hundreds of substances have been developed that produce central nervous system depression. These drugs have been referred to as downers, sedatives, hypnotics, minor tranquilizers, anxiolytics, and anti-anxiety medications. Generally, depressants are pharmaceutical products that are diverted to the illicit market. One exception to this is gamma hydroxybutyric acid (GHB).

Two major groups of depressants have dominated the licit and illicit market for nearly a century, first barbiturates and now benzodiazepines.

What Are Barbiturates?

Extremely popular in the first half of the 20th century, barbiturates are all derivatives of barbituric acid. Barbiturates are used to relax patients before surgery, as anti-convulsants, and as sleeping pills. Some barbiturates help control medical conditions such as high blood pressure, epilepsy, and ulcers.

A person taking barbiturates may exhibit signs of intoxication similar to that of drinking alcohol. Loss of inhibitions and marked changes in behavior may occur. In many individuals, side effects include nausea, nervousness, rash, and diarrhea. A person on barbiturates may have difficulty thinking and making decisions, be emotionally unstable, lack coordination, be disoriented, and have slurred speech.

Barbiturates can rapidly become psychologically and physically addictive. As the user develops a tolerance for the drug, larger and larger doses are required to get the same effect. However, the fatal dose level stays the same. The addiction potential of barbiturates and the increasing number of fatalities associated with them led drug manufacturers to develop other medications. Today less than 10 percent of all depressant prescriptions are barbiturates.

Trade names for barbiturates include Amytal, Nembutal, Seconal, Solfoton, and Luminal (phenobarbital injections). Slang names are "barbs," "reds," "red birds," "phennies," "tooies," "yellows," and "yellow jackets."

Placidyl (ethchlorvynol) is a short-term sedative-hypnotic drug used to treat insomnia. Along with the expected sedative effects, users may experience facial numbness, blurred vision, nausea, dizziness, gastric problems, and skin rashes. Because of these side effects, it is no longer a commonly prescribed medication. Combined with alcohol, Placidyl can kill.

Quaalude (methaqualone), is a barbiturate-like sedative-hypnotic drug. Slang terms include ludes, mandrex, quad, and quay. Quaalude distribution and prescriptions became strictly controlled after years of abuse. Because of adverse publicity, it has not been manufactured in the United States since 1985, though large amounts are still illegally imported. Severe overdoses cause delirium, convulsions, and seizures.

- **SAMHSA'S DAWN** found that benzodiazepines were involved in 100,784 drug abuse related emergency department visits in 2002 and were the most frequently reported type of psychotherapeutic drug.
- From 1995 to 2002, drug abuse related emergency department visits involving benzodiazepines increased 41%.

What Are The Effects?

- » Dizziness and blurred vision
- » Lack of coordination
- » Slurred speech
- » Disorientation
- » Nausea and diarrhea
- » Lack of appetite
- » Lack of sex drive
- » Severe mood swings
- » Extreme paranoia
- » Skin rashes
- » Tremors
- » Higher doses cause convulsions, coma, respiratory depression and death.

What Are Benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines are a family of depressants that are much safer with far less addiction potential than that of barbiturates. Benzodiazepines are used to induce sleep, relieve anxiety, relax muscle spasms, and prevent seizures. In general, benzodiazepines act as sedatives in low doses, and as hypnotics in high doses.

Today one out of every five prescriptions for controlled substances is a benzodiazepine. Though commonly prescribed, benzodiazepines still have many of the undesirable side effects of the barbiturates. Toxic central nervous system effects associated with high-dose therapy include headaches, irritability, confusion, memory impairment and depression. Prolonged use can lead to physical dependence, though large doses are rarely fatal unless combined with alcohol or other drugs.

Short-acting benzodiazepines are generally used for insomnia without daytime anxiety. Longer-acting benzodiazepines are used to treat insomnia in patients with anxiety disorders. Others are also used as anti-convulsants.

Rohypnol also a benzodiazepine, is neither manufactured nor approved for medical use in the United States. Rohypnol is commonly called the "date rape" drug. Its sedative effects can cause the user to suffer loss of consciousness and memory. (See Club Drugs, pages 21-23).

What is GHB?



Gamma Hydroxybutyrate, or GHB is a powerful central nervous system depressant that is often used illicitly for its euphoric and sedative effects. GHB is usually found in liquid form, though available in capsule, tablet and powdered form (Additional information is included in Club Drugs, pages 21-23).

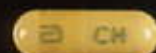
What Is Polydrug Use?

Drug abusers often take drugs to counter the effect of other drugs they are taking. Cocaine users take depressants to reduce the depression at the end of a binge. Alcoholics use depressants to reduce the withdrawal from alcohol. Alcoholics also use depressants to become intoxicated, without the associated odor of alcohol. This dangerous practice of mixing depressants and alcohol can depress the respiratory and cardiovascular systems, often with deadly consequences.

BIRTH DEFECTS

Several studies show that pregnant women who take depressants are 6 times more likely to have babies born with birth defects, such as mental retardation, heart defects, deafness, and joint deformities.

BARBITURATES



NEMBUTAL



SECONAL



AMYTAL

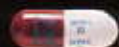
BENZODIAZEPINES



XANAX



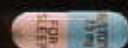
LIBRIUM



SERAX



DALMANE



RESTORIL



KLONOPIN



VALIUM



ATIVAN



TRANXENE



HALCION



DORAL



CENTRAX



ROHYPNOL