



Prescription Depressant Medications

Street names: Barbs, Phennies, Reds

EXPAND ALL

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What is prescription depressant misuse?



Also known as: A-minus, Barbs, Candy, Downers, Phennies, Red Birds, Reds, Sleeping Pills, Tooies, Tranks, Yellows, Yellow Jackets, Yellows, and Zombie Pills

Depressants, sometimes referred to as central nervous system (CNS) depressants or tranquilizers, slow down (or “depress”) the normal activity that goes on in the brain and spinal cord. Doctors often prescribe them for people who are anxious or can't sleep.

When prescription depressants are taken as prescribed by a doctor, they can be relatively safe and helpful. However, dependence and addiction are still potential risks. These risks increase when these drugs are misused. Taking the drugs to get “high” can cause serious, and even dangerous, problems.

Depressants can be divided into three primary groups: barbiturates, benzodiazepines, and sleep medications.

Depressants

Type	Conditions They Treat
<p>Barbiturates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mephobarbital (Mebaral) • Sodium pentobarbital (Nembutal) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seizure disorders • Anxiety and tension
<p>Benzodiazepines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diazepam (Valium) • Alprazolam (Xanax) • Estazolam (ProSom) • Clonazepam (Klonopin) • Lorazepam (Ativan) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acute stress reactions • Panic attacks • Convulsions • Sleep disorders
<p>Sleep Medications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zolpidem (Ambien) • Zaleplon (Sonata) • Eszopiclone (Lunesta) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep disorders

How Prescription Depressants Are Misused

Depressants usually come in pill or capsule form. People misuse depressants by taking them in a way that is not intended, such as:

- Taking someone else's prescription depressant medication.
- Taking a depressant medication in a way other than prescribed by their doctor.
- Taking a depressant for fun or to get high.
- Taking a depressant with other drugs or to counteract the effects of other drugs, such as [stimulants](#).
- Mixing them with other substances, like alcohol or [prescription opioids](#).

Read more about [prescription drugs](#) and what happens to the brain and body when someone misuses them.

What happens to your brain when you use prescription depressants?

Most depressants affect the brain by increasing the activity of gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), a chemical in the brain that sends messages between cells. The increased GABA activity in turn slows down brain activity. This causes a relaxing effect that is helpful to people with anxiety or sleep problems. Too much GABA activity, though, can be harmful.

Learn more about [how the brain works and what happens when a person misuses drugs](#).

What happens to your body when you use prescription depressants?

As depressants slow down brain activity, they cause other effects:

- slurred speech
- shallow breathing, which can lead to overdose and even death.
- sleepiness
- disorientation
- lack of coordination

These effects can lead to serious accidents or injuries. Misuse of depressants can also lead to physical dependence, another reason they should only be used as prescribed. Dependence means you will feel uncomfortable or ill when you try to stop taking the drug, and it can lead to addiction.

Depressants should not be combined with any medicine or substance that causes sleepiness, like prescription pain medicines, certain over-the-counter cold and allergy medicines, or alcohol. If combined, they can slow both the heart rate and breathing increasing the risk of overdose and death.

Can you overdose or die if you use prescription depressants?

Yes, you can die if you misuse depressants. The risk for overdose and death are increased when depressants are combined with alcohol or other drugs.

More than 8,700 people died from an overdose of a benzodiazepine, such as Valium or Xanax, in 2015.¹ Deaths from an overdose of prescription drugs in general have been on the rise since the early 1990s. Learn more about [drug overdoses in youth](#).

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Underlying Cause of Death 1999–2015 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released 2016. Available at <http://wonder.cdc.gov>.

Are prescription depressants addictive?

They can be. Depressants work by slowing the brain's activity. During the first few days of taking a depressant, a person usually feels sleepy and uncoordinated. With continuing use, the body becomes used to these effects and they become less noticeable. This is known as tolerance, which means a person has to take more of the drug to get the same initial effects.

People can become physically dependent while taking prescription depressants, and to avoid uncomfortable symptoms of [withdrawal](#), they can work with their doctor to stop taking the drugs on a slow timetable. If you have been using depressants regularly and try to suddenly stop, your brain activity might race out of control to the point where it causes seizures. It is important to note that misusing depressants can lead to both physical dependence and addiction, which is when a person continues to use a drug despite negative consequences.

How many teens use prescription depressants?

Below is a chart showing the percentage of teens who misuse prescription depressants.

Monitoring the Future Study: Trends in Prevalence of Tranquilizers for 8th Graders, 10th Graders, and 12th Graders; 2016 (in percent)*

Drug	Time Period	8th Graders	10th Graders	12th Graders
Tranquilizers	Lifetime	3.00	6.10	7.60
	Past Year	1.70	4.10	4.90
	Past Month	0.80	1.50	1.90

For the most recent statistics on teen drug use, see results from [NIDA's Monitoring the Future study](#).

What should I do if someone I know needs help?

If you see or hear about someone misusing opioids, talk to a coach, teacher, or other trusted adult.

If you, or a friend, are in crisis and need to speak with someone now, please call:

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK** (they don't just talk about suicide—they cover a lot of issues and will help put you in touch with someone close by).

If you need information on treatment and where you can find it, you can call:

- **Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator at 1-800-662-HELP** or visit www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov.

For more information on how to help a friend or loved one, visit our [Have a Drug Problem, Need Help? page](#).

Where can I get more information?

Drug Facts

NIDA:

- [Commonly Abused Prescription Drugs Chart](#)

- [DrugFacts: Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medications](#)
- [Research Report Series: Misuse of Prescription Drugs](#)

Statistics and Trends

NIDA:

- [DrugFacts: High School and Youth Trends](#)

Monitoring the Future (University of Michigan):

- [Monitoring the Future](#)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:

- [National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#)

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