

## Understanding the Side Effects of Sleeping Pills

Between a third and half of all Americans have insomnia and complain of poor sleep. Perhaps you're one of them. If so, you may be considering taking a sleeping pill.

A sleeping pill may be effective at ending your sleep problems short-term. But it's important to make sure you understand everything you need to know about sleeping pills. That includes knowing about sleeping pill side effects. When you do, you can avoid misusing these sedatives.

### What Are Sleeping Pills?

Most sleeping pills are "sedative hypnotics." That's a specific class of drugs used to induce and/or maintain sleep. Sedative hypnotics include benzodiazepines, barbiturates, and various hypnotics. Benzodiazepines such as Xanax, Valium, Ativan, and Librium are anti-anxiety medications. They also increase drowsiness and help people sleep. While these drugs may be useful short-term, all benzodiazepines are potentially addictive.

Barbiturates, another drug in this sedative-hypnotic class, depress the central nervous system and can cause sedation. Short- or long-acting barbiturates are prescribed as sedatives or sleeping pills. But more commonly these hypnotic drugs are limited to use as anesthesia.

Newer medications help reduce the time it takes to fall asleep. These sleep-inducing drugs, including Lunesta, Sonata, and Ambien, are said to be non-habit forming. They work quickly to increase drowsiness and sleep. Rozerem acts differently from other sleep medicines and is not habit-forming. Halcion is an older sedative-hypnotic medicine that has largely been replaced by newer medicines.

### What Are the Side Effects of Sleeping Pills?

Sleeping pills have side effects like most medications. You won't know, though, whether you will experience side effects with a particular sleeping pill until you try it.

Your doctor may be able to alert you to the possibility of side effects if you have asthma or other health conditions. Sleeping pills make you breathe more slowly and less deeply. That can be dangerous for people with uncontrolled lung problems such as asthma or COPD.

Common side effects of prescription sleeping pills such as Lunesta, Sonata, Ambien, Rozerem, and Halcion may include:

- Burning or tingling in the hands, arms, feet, or legs
- Changes in appetite
- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Difficulty keeping balance
- Dizziness
- Drowsiness
- Dry mouth or throat
- Gas
- Headache
- Heartburn
- Stomach pain or tenderness
- Uncontrollable shaking of a part of the body
- Unusual dreams
- Weakness

The FDA requires manufacturers of Ambien and Zolpimist to offer lower doses for women. Women clear the drugs from their systems more slowly than men and the agency says blood levels of the drugs could still be high enough the following morning to affect activities that require alertness, such as driving. The FDA says doctors should offer the lower dose to men too.

It's important to be aware of possible sleeping pill side effects so you can stop the drug and call your doctor immediately to avoid a more serious health problem.

### **Are There More Complex Sleeping Pill Side Effects?**

Some sleeping pills have potentially harmful side effects, including parasomnias. Parasomnias are behaviors and actions over which you have no control, like sleepwalking. During a parasomnia, you are asleep and unaware of what is happening.

Parasomnias with sleeping pills are complex sleep behaviors and may include sleep eating, making phone calls, or having sex while in a sleep state. Sleep driving, which is driving while not fully awake, is another serious sleeping pill side effect. Though rare, parasomnias are difficult to detect once the medication takes effect.

Product labels for sedative-hypnotic medicines include language about the potential risks of taking a sleeping pill. Because complex sleep behaviors are more likely to occur if you increase the dosage of a sleeping pill, take only what your doctor prescribes -- no more.

### **Can I Be Allergic to Sleeping Pills?**

Yes. Some people may have an allergic reaction when taking a sleeping pill and should avoid them. It's important to talk to your doctor at the first sign of these serious side effects, including:

- Blurred vision or any other problems with your sight
- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing or swallowing
- Feeling that the throat is closing
- Hives
- Hoarseness
- Itching
- Nausea
- Pounding heartbeat
- Rash
- Shortness of breath
- Swelling of the eyes, face, lips, tongue, or throat
- Vomiting

In addition, a serious -- even deadly -- side effect of any medicine someone is allergic to is anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis is an acute allergic reaction. Another possible effect is angioedema, which is severe facial swelling. Again, discuss these possibilities with your doctor if you are at risk of allergic reactions.

### **When Do I Take a Sleeping Pill?**

It's usually recommended that you take the sleeping pill right before your desired bedtime. Read your doctor's instructions on the sleeping pill prescription label. The instructions have specific information regarding your medication. In addition, always allow ample time to sleep before you take a sleeping pill.

### **Is It Dangerous to Combine Sleeping Pills and Alcohol?**

Yes. Mixing alcohol and sleeping pills can be extremely hazardous. The combination increases the sedative effect of sleeping pills, and that can be fatal. In fact, sleeping pill labels warn against using alcohol while taking the drug.

Also, you should not eat grapefruit or drink grapefruit juice while taking some sleeping pills. Grapefruit increases the amount of the drug absorbed into your bloodstream and how long it stays in the body. That can actually cause over sedation.

### **Can I Become Dependent on Sleeping Pills?**

For short-term insomnia, your doctor may prescribe sleeping pills for several weeks. Yet after regular use for a longer period, your sleeping pill may stop working as you build a tolerance to the medication. You may also become psychologically dependent on the medicine. Then the idea of going to sleep without it will make you anxious.

Without the sleeping pill, you might find it difficult to sleep. If that happens it could be a sign of a physical or emotional dependence or both. Some studies show that long-term use of sleeping pills actually interferes with sleep. The best way to avoid developing a physical or emotional dependence on sleeping pills is to follow your doctor's instructions and stop taking the drug when recommended.

#### SOURCES:

American Academy of Family Physicians: "Insomnia: How to Get A Good Night's Sleep."

FDA: "Side Effects of Sleep Drugs."

American Academy of Sleep Medicine: "Preventing Parasomnias."

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke: "Brain Basics: Understanding Sleep."

Medline Plus: "Aging Changes in Sleep."

News release, FDA.

Reviewed by Joseph Goldberg, MD on October 06, 2012

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<http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/guide/understanding-the-side-effects-of-sleeping-pills>