

Benzodiazepines and risk of suicide

In a recent letter to Chief Pharmacists and Medical Directors from NHS Improvement, the potential risks of suicide associated with benzodiazepine prescribing and withdrawal were highlighted.

There may be an increased risk of suicidal behaviour during use of benzodiazepines due to potential disinhibition. There is an increased risk of potential for suicide during withdrawal from benzodiazepines.

Recommendations

- Consider the risks of potential suicidal behaviour prior to initiating benzodiazepines.
- Patients who are receiving benzodiazepines for extended periods of time should be reviewed by their prescribers on a regular basis so that their suitability for long term prescribing can be assessed.
- When considering withdrawal of benzodiazepines, assess whether it is a suitable time for the individual, enquire about:
 - **Symptoms of depression.** Withdrawing these drugs can worsen symptoms of clinical depression. The priority is to manage depression first, before attempting drug withdrawal.
 - **Symptoms of anxiety** Withdrawing treatment when significant symptoms of anxiety are present is likely to make symptoms worse and is therefore unlikely to succeed. However, when symptoms are reasonably well controlled and stable it may be possible to attempt careful drug withdrawal.
- Particular attention should be paid to the following.
 - The need for regular and close monitoring of patients who are withdrawing from benzodiazepines.
 - The need to consider the particular risks associated with shorter acting benzodiazepines.

For more information consult relevant guidance from NICE and The British Association for Psychopharmacology (BAP) on prescribing/withdrawal of benzodiazepines.

<https://cks.nice.org.uk/benzodiazepine-and-z-drug-withdrawal#!scenario>

<https://www.bap.org.uk/docdetails.php?docID=77>