

# SEDATIVES

---

## WHAT ARE SEDATIVES?

Sedatives are part of the larger category of “depressants”, drugs which depress the central nervous system. This group of drugs is also called “sedative-hypnotic” because it includes drugs which calm the nerves (the sedation effect) and produce sleep (the hypnotic effect).

Other depressant drugs such as alcohol, narcotics, and phencyclidine (PCP) are described in other fact sheets in this series.

This fact sheet will focus on barbiturates, nonbarbiturates, and benzodiazapines. These are also commonly known as sleeping pills and tranquilizers. All are (or have been) legally available by prescription for medical purposes. All of them can be abused.

- Barbiturates, or sleeping pills, include Nembutal and Seconal. Slang names for these drugs include “barbs”, “downers”, and “reds.” Barbiturates are now very seldom prescribed. They have been replaced by the safer benzodiazapines.

- Nonbarbiturate sedatives include Doriden, Miltown, and Placidyl. They are also prescribed legally to help people sleep. The non-barbiturate sedative Methaqualone (Sopor, or Quaalude) is no longer legally available in the United States, but is still abused.

- Benzodiazapines include Valium, Librium, and Xanax. They are prescribed to relieve anxiety.

Sedatives are made in capsule or tablet form. They are most often taken orally.

## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF SEDATIVES?

Their effects are similar to alcohol. In small doses, they produce calmness and relaxed muscles. Drowsiness and impairment of memory may occur. Larger doses cause slurred speech, altered perception, and loss of coordination. Larger doses of barbiturates cause sleep.

Heavy doses can cause respiratory depression, coma, and death.

## WHAT IMMEDIATE RISKS OCCUR WITH SEDATIVES?

Overdose can cause coma or death. Risk of death is greatest with barbiturates. Use can also produce a stupor in which the user is inattentive, lacks judgment, and thus risks injury at home or in auto crashes.

Sedatives taken with alcohol cause greater risk since the effects of one drug multiply the effects of the other.

## ARE SOME SEDATIVES LESS DANGEROUS THAN OTHERS?

Using any sedative creates some risk. They can be dangerous, by themselves or combined with other drugs, especially alcohol or other sedatives. Benzodiazapines are considerably less risky than barbiturates, and have replaced barbiturates in most uses.

## CAN SEDATIVES CAUSE DEPENDENCE?

Yes. All sedatives can cause

dependence. How much and how often these drugs are taken affect how quickly tolerance and dependence develop. Both legal and illegal users can develop dependence.

Withdrawal symptoms may range from restlessness, insomnia, and anxiety to convulsions and death. Barbiturate withdrawal is often more severe than heroin withdrawal.

## IS THERE TREATMENT FOR SEDATIVE DEPENDENCE?

Treatment may include medical care during withdrawal, and individual and/ or group counseling. Support from a self help group may be part of a treatment program.

## HOW ARE SEDATIVES USUALLY OBTAINED?

Some people abuse sedatives that they obtained legally. About half of sedative overdose cases in emergency rooms have a legal prescription. Other people get sedatives from friends who have valid prescriptions, or get the drugs with forged prescriptions. The drugs are also sold on the street.

## HOW COMMON IS SEDATIVE ABUSE?

The United States 1997 National Household Survey found that less than .5% of the US population reported non-medical use of sedatives in the past year. The greatest rate of non-medical use in the past year was .9%, by males aged 18 to 25.

## WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF SEDATIVE USE DURING PREGNANCY?

Babies born to mothers who abuse sedatives during pregnancy may be physically dependent on the drugs. They may suffer withdrawal symptoms shortly after they are born. Delivery problems, poor infant health, birth defects, and behavioral problems may also result if the mother uses sedatives.

A woman who is pregnant, considering pregnancy, or breastfeeding should not use these drugs if at all possible. If their use is necessary, the woman should use them only under a doctor's supervision.

## SOURCES

US Department of Labor. What Works: Workplaces Without Drugs. 1991. Page 60.

US Department of Health and Human Services. Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs may Harm the Unborn. 1990. Page 46.

US Department of Health and Human Services. National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Population Estimates 1997. Table 10a. Website information 8/26/99.

## LEGAL INFORMATION

Barbiturates and Benzodiazepines are classified as controlled substances by Michigan and federal Law. Use, possession, and delivery without appropriate license or prescription are prohibited.

Penalties include imprisonment and fines. Certain penalties are mandatory.

Penalties are increased if a person eighteen years or older distributes the drug to a person under eighteen, or distributes the drug near school property.

For details on the legal penalties, refer to the Michigan Law Fact Sheet in this series.



## MICHIGAN RESOURCE CENTER

For Alcohol, Tobacco & Other Drug Information,  
Health Promotion, and Traffic Safety Education Materials  
111 W. Edgewood Blvd., Ste. 11 • Lansing, MI 48911  
(517) 882-9955

MATERIALS INFO. 800-626-4636 • FAX (517) 882-7778

E-Mail: [info@wearemrc.org](mailto:info@wearemrc.org)

Website: [www.wearemrc.org](http://www.wearemrc.org)

This fact sheet was printed and distributed by the Michigan Resource Center which is operated by the Traffic Safety Association of Michigan under contracts from the Michigan Department of Community Health, Health Promotion and Publication, and Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, including Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Federal Block Grant funds. Additional funding and materials provided by the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning.