

What is the most popular prescription drug category? If you answered pain medicine, you're wrong! The correct answer is a group of medicines called benzodiazepines, more commonly seen under the prescription names: Xanax (alprazolam), Klonopin (clonazepam), Ativan (lorazepam), Librium (chlordiazepoxide), Valium (diazepam) and Serax (oxazepam). Benzodiazepines (benzos) are central nervous system depressants much like alcohol. They slow perceptions and responses while producing a calming/sedating effect on a person's immediate mood. It's often described as if a person were driving a car with the brakes on, slowed down even when the gas pedal is pushed. Benzos are the most commonly prescribed medicines for anxiety and panic disorders. Unfortunately many people rely on taking the drug instead of resolving why they have the anxiety issues or building coping skills to manage their symptoms. Like alcohol, physical dependence can build quickly, often creating life-threatening withdrawal symptoms such as seizures, unconsciousness, blood pressure issues and strokes when suddenly stopping the drug. Many people feel that they can't stop using a benzo because of the huge rush of anxiety they feel when they cut back or stop. This is due to a sudden change in brain chemistry, feeling like the brakes are ripped from the car and it is careening out of control, usually lasting three to four weeks. It can take months before the brain chemistry stabilizes, leaving the person struggling with a depressed mood state and little energy. We get many calls from people who've been using benzos for years, or have been mixing them with other drugs, usually alcohol, or taking them to soften a crash from a binge. Due to the lethal risk of withdrawal, most benzo addicts are referred to inpatient detoxification. Sometimes 911 need to be called because of the medical danger. Clients are often extremely angry that they've become addicted to a drug given to help them cope with anxiety or panic. Recovery from benzodiazepine addiction is a very rocky road. Withdrawal is rough, often leading the person back to using. Months of low energy and depressed mood contribute to relapse or turning to alcohol to cope. Words like "hope" and "peace" seem unattainable concepts in the beginning. Life seems out of control and punishing. Feeling shamed can become a state of being if not confronted effectively through 12-step programs or treatment. In active addiction a person lives inside their own bubble, isolated and distant from others - seemingly safe. In recovery, a person learns to reach out beyond themselves and hold on to something bigger than the trap of their addiction. In treatment one gains skills and education about anxiety: how and why it happened and what to do about it. The emotional burdens and shame are replaced with caring for one's self, learning to receive the gifts others have to offer them, and how to stay abstinent from all substances as clean time builds and strengthens. As a recovering addict, one of my drugs of choice was benzos. I have great compassion for the daily struggle of early recovery. I had wonderful "angels" in friends and counselors who supported, challenged, educated, and most of all laughed with me. I also know the wonderful miracles I've seen in those that have persevered, taking life one moment at a time, one breath at a time, moving forward to one day at a time. If you know someone who is using benzos take hope and know that there is a way out of the long dark slide of addiction. Yvonne Hess is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) and a Certified Addictions Professional (CAP) with an International Certification as an Alcohol and Drug Counselor (ICADC) who works for the Citrus County Health Department's Phoenix Program. She can be reached at 527-0068, ext. 272, or [yvonne\\_hess@doh.state.fl.us](mailto:yvonne_hess@doh.state.fl.us).