

Inpatient sleeping drug quadrupled fall risk

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A drug commonly prescribed to help patients sleep in hospitals has been associated with an increased risk of falls, according to a study published in the *Journal of Hospital Medicine*.

U.S. sleep specialists from the Mayo Clinic found that the fall rate among the 4,962 patients who took zolpidem during their hospital stay was more than four times as high as the 11,358 who did not take the drug.

They also found that the risk posed by the drug was greater than the risks posed by factors such as age, [cognitive impairment](#), [delirium](#) or insomnia, regardless of the dosage used.

"Ensuring that people get enough sleep during their hospital stay is very important, but it can also prove very challenging," says the Clinic's Chief Patient Safety Officer Dr. Timothy I. Morgenthaler, who specializes in [sleep disorders](#) and pulmonary and critical care.

"Patient falls are also a significant [patient safety](#) issue in hospitals and one that has been quite difficult to tackle, despite considerable efforts. That is why it is one of the target aims of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Partnership for Patients project."

"Discovering that zolpidem, which is commonly used in hospitals, is a significant risk factor for patient falls provides us with additional knowledge to help tackle this problem."

Key findings of the study include:

- Just under 39 percent of eligible admissions during 2010 were prescribed zolpidem (16,320 patients) but 88 percent of the prescriptions were issued on an "as needed basis."
- Zolpidem was administered to 30.4 percent of patients who were prescribed it and to 11.8 percent of all Mayo Clinic admissions in 2010.
- Just over three percent of the patients on zolpidem fell during their in-patient hospital stay, compared with 0.7 percent of the patients who did not take zolpidem.
- Zolpidem use continued to be associated with an increased fall risk when other key factors, including health, length of hospital stay and assessed fall risk, were taken into consideration.

"Our hospitals have an overall fall rate of about 2.5 per 1000 patient days, which is lower than many national benchmarks. However, we have not been able to significantly reduce this rate in recent years. Now, we calculate that for every 55 patients who received zolpidem, there was one additional fall that may have been avoided by not administering the drug," says Dr. Morgenthaler.

"As a result of our study, we are now phasing out [zolpidem](#) and moving toward sleep enhancement techniques that are not based on drugs and which we believe are safer and probably as effective."

More information: Morgenthaler et al. Zolpidem is Independently Associated with Increased Risk of Inpatient Falls. *Journal of Hospital Medicine*. [DOI: 10.1002/jhm.1985](https://doi.org/10.1002/jhm.1985)

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