

Seniors still given potentially dangerous sedatives, study finds

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Drugs such as Xanax, Valium tied to confusion and falls, experts say.

(HealthDay)—Doctors continue to prescribe sedatives such as Xanax or Valium for seniors despite the significant risks they pose, a new study contends.

The drugs in question are a class of medications called benzodiazepines. This class includes drugs such as Xanax, Valium and Ativan. As people get older, these drugs are known to put seniors at risk for confusion and falls. Yet, the researchers found that older folks are increasingly being prescribed these medications.

The analysis included national data from 2008. It showed that about 5 percent of Americans aged 18 to 80 (11.5 million people) were prescribed these drugs. Just under 3 percent of people between the ages

of 18 and 35 were given these sedatives. But among those aged 65 to 80, nearly 9 percent were on the drugs, according to the study.

Almost one-third of seniors given these sedatives stayed on them for at least four months, the researchers found. Long-term use may make the medications less effective. There's also a greater risk of dependence on the drugs with long-term use, according to the study authors.

"These prescribing patterns likely put a large number of older adults at unnecessary risk of falls, [motor vehicle accidents](#) and confusion," study senior author Dr. Mark Olfson, a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center and a research psychiatrist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, said in a university news release.

"As life expectancy increases and the population ages, an increasing number of older adult Americans will face these risks from long-term benzodiazepine use unless steps are taken to promote safer alternative treatments," Olfson said.

The researchers hope the study is a wake-up call for health care professionals. They suggested that [health care professionals](#) could teach [older adults](#) who have trouble sleeping or experience anxiety about non-[drug](#) options for their problems.

"Examples include increasing light-to-moderate exercise, promoting supportive relationships, ensuring adequate exposure to natural light, avoiding stimulants such as caffeine late in the day, avoiding naps, establishing a regular, relaxing bedtime routine, and accepting that quality of sleep naturally tends to decline as we age."

The study was published online Dec. 17 in the journal *JAMA Psychiatry*.

More information: HealthinAging.org has more about [older adults](#)

[and medications.](#)

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