

Substances At A Glance: Sedatives

According to the National Drug Driving Research Project, CNS depressants were found in 1 in 5 injured drivers in 15 trauma centres across Canada between 2018-2021.¹



What are sedatives? Sedatives are medications also known as depressants because they slow down (or 'depress') certain functions in the body. They can be prescribed to reduce symptoms of anxiety (benzodiazepines), help a person with sleep problems (barbiturates) or keep a person unconscious during surgery (anesthesia). They are also used in treatment for alcohol withdrawal, seizure control and as muscle relaxants.



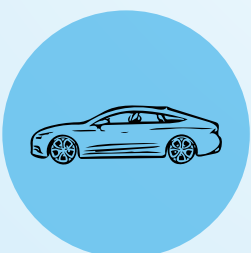
Sedative use among youth: In Canada, approximately 8% of youth ages 15 to 24 report past-year prescription sedative use overall.² Meanwhile, 2% of youth in grades 7-12 report using sedatives in the past 12 months to get high,³ as well as 9% of post-secondary age students. Among post-secondary students, 14% of those who use sedatives to get high report high-risk use of sedatives.⁴



Why do people use sedatives? People use prescription sedatives like benzodiazepines or barbiturates as directed by a healthcare provider for many of the reasons listed above. Sedatives can also alter the way a person thinks, acts or responds to the world around them, so some people use them without a prescription to get high or alter their thinking. In 2020, 61% of post-secondary students who used sedatives for non-medical purposes said they did so to feel impaired.



Short and long-term effects: Sedatives can have a calming or relaxing effect when taken as directed. Using more can cause drowsiness and decreased coordination, slurred speech, decreased blood pressure, dizziness, impaired judgment & memory and unconsciousness. Side effects can include amnesia, depression or (in rare cases) hallucinations. Long-term effects include vision problems, breathing problems, liver damage and sexual dysfunction.



Sedatives and driving: Sedatives can impact many of the skills needed to drive safely. They can reduce a person's alertness, slow their reaction time, reduce their coordination as well as ability to judge distance and cause a person to fall asleep behind the wheel. These effects can last from 4 to 24 hours, depending on the drug used and dosage. Drivers who test positive for the use of sedatives are 2 to 8 times more likely than alcohol- and drug-free drivers to be involved in a fatal traffic crash.⁵



Get more information about sedatives on [our website](#).



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In B.C, 50% of suspected overdose deaths included benzodiazepine use in May 2021.⁶ In Ontario, nearly half of opioid related deaths included benzodiazepine use in 2020.⁷



Sedatives and the law: Sedative use is legal only when used by a person who has a prescription by a licensed healthcare provider. It is illegal to get prescriptions from multiple providers for sedatives over a 30 day period - this is known as "double doctoring" and can lead to 18 months in prison.¹ Trafficking, importing, exporting or producing sedatives can also result in three years in prison.



What are the risks of sedative use? Sedative use can cause long-term learning and concentration problems. It's also possible to overdose on sedatives, as a person can fall into a coma or die from overconsumption. Since sedatives can cause feelings of relaxation and calmness, their use can also become problematic. Withdrawal symptoms include sweating, headache, tremors, fear, fatigue, loss of appetite. Severe symptoms include agitation, paranoia, delusions and seizures.



How can I help my kids understand the risks of sedatives? If your child uses sedatives, especially for non-medical reasons, it's important they limit their use to avoid accidental overdose. Discuss with them the signs of overdose and the importance of not mixing sedatives with other drugs. Ensure they know that you will support them if they ever experience harm or need help as a result of substance use.



How can someone reduce the risks of sedative use? Sedatives should only be used by the person who has a prescription from their healthcare provider. Sedatives should never be mixed with drugs or alcohol. They should also ask their doctor about any medications that cannot be mixed with sedatives. People trying to reduce or quit using sedatives should do so with medical supervision. Unused sedatives can be returned to a pharmacy at any time.



Mixing sedatives and other drugs: Mixing sedatives with drugs like alcohol, opioids and other medications can be extremely dangerous, even fatal. Mixing sedatives with alcohol reduces heart rate to life-threatening levels. Mixing sedatives with medications can cause severe drowsiness, confusion, weakness, reduced heartbeat, difficulty in breathing and unconsciousness. Mixing sedatives with opioids can prevent a person from waking up if they overdose, even after the use of Naloxone, increasing the risk of death.

Reference List

1. Canadian Center on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), 2022. [Sedatives](#).
2. Government of Canada, 2020. [Canadian Alcohol and Drugs Survey](#).
3. Government of Canada, 2023. [Canadian Student Tobacco Alcohol and Drug Use Survey](#).
4. Government of Canada, 2024. [Canadian Post-Secondary Education Alcohol & Drug Use Survey 2021-2022](#).
5. CCSA, 2015. [Sedatives, Driving and Implications for Youth](#).
6. British Columbia Coroners Service, 2023. [Illicit Drug Toxicity Type of Drug Data to December 31, 2022](#).
7. CCSA, 2021. [Risks and Harms Associated with the Nonmedical Use of Benzodiazepines in the Unregulated Drug Supply in Canada](#).