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What are benzodiazepines?

Benzodiazepines have been proposed as an alternative therapy to standard antipsychotic treatments in an attempt to improve functional outcomes and treat symptoms that are not addressed by the antipsychotic medications. Benzodiazepine medications induce anxiolytic, sedative, muscle relaxant, and amnesic effects when used therapeutically. Benzodiazepines may be implemented as a short-term therapy in order to treat acute symptoms of psychosis, such as agitation or aggression. They have also been suggested as an ongoing treatment regime, as they may have fewer side effects than antipsychotics. However, the efficacy of benzodiazepines for reducing side effects of antipsychotics is unclear, as they may be associated with adverse effects of their own. Benzodiazepines are also associated with well-established patterns of tolerance and dependence and are prescribed with caution.

What is the evidence for benzodiazepines?

High quality evidence shows a lower risk of extrapyramidal (movement) side effects with benzodiazepines than with antipsychotics. Moderate quality evidence shows benzodiazepines were associated with a faster rate of sedation and more improvement in global state than antipsychotics. Moderate to low quality evidence suggests less excitation with antipsychotics than with benzodiazepines. No differences were found between benzodiazepines and antipsychotics in study attrition, behavioural improvement, mental state, need for additional medication or restraint, agitation, service use, hospital discharge, or relapse.

Compared to placebo, moderate to low quality evidence suggests greater clinical improvement but a significantly increased risk of side effects such as low energy levels and ataxia with benzodiazepines. No differences were found between benzodiazepines and placebo in study attrition, relapse, anxiety, or other adverse effects.

For more information see the technical table



NeuRA

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NeuRA (Neuroscience Research Australia) is one of the largest independent medical and clinical research institutes in Australia and an international leader in neurological research.

Diseases of the brain and nervous system pose the greatest health, economic and social burden of any disease group because they are chronic, debilitating and have no known cures.

Medical research is the cornerstone of efforts to advance the health and wellbeing of families and the community. Our dedicated scientists are focussed on transforming their research into significant and practical benefits for all patients.

While we hope you find this information useful, it is always important to discuss any questions about schizophrenia or its treatment with your doctor or other health care provider.

HOW YOUR SUPPORT HELPS

We are able to make significant advances due to the generosity of countless people. Your donation allows us to continue to work towards transforming lives. For information on how you can support our research, phone **1300 888 019** or make a secure donation at neura.edu.au/donate/schizophrenia.