

Drug Information Bulletin

Risk of Concurrent use of Benzodiazepines and Opioids

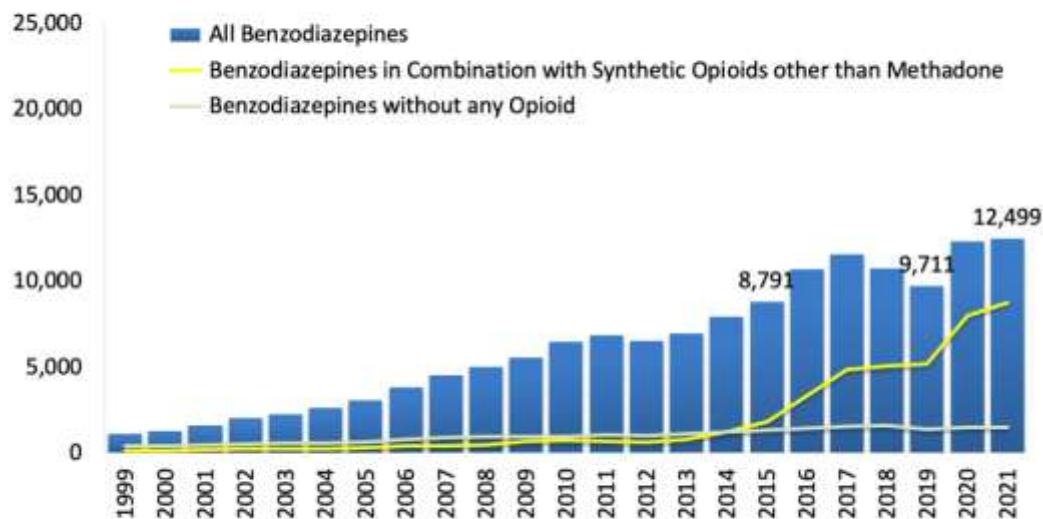
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Dear Provider,

Deaths by opioid overdose in the United States have more than doubled in the past decade.¹ As a result, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) declared a public health emergency in 2017, when opioid-related deaths were considered to have reached crisis levels.

When initiating opioid therapy, risks that already exist for patients prior to prescribing opioids should be assessed. For example, the **concurrent use of benzodiazepines and opioids accounts for more than 30% of opioid-related deaths**. It is also associated with a higher risk of emergency department visits and inpatient admissions.^{2,3} The combination of opioids and benzodiazepines increases the risk of death by overdose more than either substance separately (Figure 9). The risk of opioid-related overdose increases 5-fold in the first 90 days of concurrent benzodiazepine and opioid prescribing.⁴ **Therefore, avoiding concurrent opioid and benzodiazepine prescribing could potentially save thousands of lives annually.**⁵

Figure 9. National Drug Overdose Deaths Involving Benzodiazepines*, by Opioid Involvement, Number Among All Ages, 1999-2021



*Among deaths with drug overdose as the underlying cause, the benzodiazepine category was determined by the T42.4 ICD-10 multiple cause-of-death code. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Multiple Cause of Death 1999-2021 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released 1/2023.

Figure 9. National Drug Overdose Deaths Involving Benzodiazepines, by Opioid Involvement—Number Among All Ages, 1999-2021. The figure above is a bar and line graph showing the total number of U.S. overdose deaths involving benzodiazepines from 1999 to 2021. Drug overdose deaths involving



benzodiazepines steadily increased from 1,135 in 1999 to 11,537 in 2017 and declined to 9,711 in 2019. Between 2019 and 2021, deaths rose again to 12,499. The bars are overlaid by lines showing the number of deaths involving benzodiazepines in combination with synthetic opioids other than methadone (primarily fentanyl) or without any opioid (Source: CDC WONDER). <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates> (Accessed 2024 June 18)

Determining that a patient has the **appropriate** clinical indications for the use of an opioid for pain relief is another form of prevention. Assessing the type of pain that a patient is experiencing (e.g., neuropathic vs nociceptive, acute vs chronic) could determine the proper treatment. Nonopioid treatments are generally preferred for non-cancer-related chronic pain. **Opioids are considered a treatment option only when potential benefits outweigh risks and when safe treatment goals are clearly defined and reviewed.**⁶ Evidence-based guidelines can be helpful in directing the safest and most effective pain treatment for an individual patient.^{7,8}

Please consider re-evaluating your patients who are currently on an opioid and a benzodiazepine concurrently.

References:

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2. McClure FL, et al. Concurrent use of opioids and benzodiazepines: Evaluation of prescription drug monitoring by a United States laboratory. *Journal of Addiction Medicine*. November/December 2017 Vol 11, Issue 6 p420-6.
3. Sun EC, et al. Association between concurrent use of prescription opioids and benzodiazepines and overdose: retrospective analysis. *BMJ*. 2017 Mar 14;356:j760. doi: 10.1136/bmj.j760.
4. Hernandez I, et al. Exposure-response association between concurrent opioid and benzodiazepine use and risk of opioid-related overdose in Medicare Part D beneficiaries. *JAMA Network Open*. 2018;1(2):e180919. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.0919.
5. Bristow, D. MCG White Paper: Part of Hearst Health Network. Opioid Use Disorder and Overcoming the Opioid Crisis.
6. Dowell D, Haegerich TM, Chou R. CDC guideline for prescribing opioids for chronic pain—United States, 2016. *JAMA* 2016;315(15):1624-45. doi:10.1001/jama.2016.1464.
7. Dowell D, Haegerich TM, Chou R. CDC Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain — United States, 2016. *MMWR Recomm Rep* 2016;65(No. RR-1):1–49. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.rr6501e1>. Accessed June 18, 2024
8. CDC's Clinical Practice Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Pain. 2022 Clinical Practice Guideline Recommendations. <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/healthcare-professionals/prescribing/guideline/index.html>. Accessed June 18, 2024

Should you have any questions, please contact your assigned Provider Relations Representative or call the Provider Relations main line 305-422-9300 option 2. You may also reach the Pharmacy Department at 305-422-9300 option 4.

Thank you.

Doctors HealthCare Plans, Inc.