Facts about Antianxiety and Sedative Medications

Introduction

Antianxiety and sedative medications are drugs primarily used to reduce anxiety and chronic overarousal, and to facilitate sleep. These medications are widely prescribed, both to persons with a psychiatric disorder and to those in distress but without a specific psychiatric disorder. Antianxiety and sedative drugs are used with a variety of different psychiatric disorders, usually in combination with other medications.

Different Types of Medications

Antianxiety and sedative medications can be divided into two broad classes of drugs: Antianxiety medications and sedative-hypnotics (the term hypnotic refers to sleep inducing). All of these drugs have clinical effects on both reducing anxiety and causing sedation, although antianxiety drugs have the most specific effect on anxiety. Unlike many other medications for psychiatric disorders, the effects of these drugs are quite rapid and require only one to two hours to take effect. These different types of medication are described below.

Antianxiety Medications

The most common type of antianxiety drugs is the chemical class of benzodiazepines. In addition to relieving severe symptoms of anxiety, these drugs also relax the muscles and cause mild sedation. Many different types of benzodiazepines exist. Another common antianxiety medication is Buspar (buspirone), which is in a different chemical class from the benzodiazepines. Antidepressant medications are sometimes also used for the treatment of anxiety, such as obsessive compulsive disorder. Antidepressant medications are described in a separate handout.

The clinical effects of the different types of benzodiazepines on anxiety are the same. However, the drugs differ in how long they remain in the body (measured by how long it takes for the body to excrete half of the drug-the drug's half-life). Some benzodiazepines remain in the body for relatively brief periods of time (such as Xanax, with a half life of twelve hours), while others remain much longer (such as Valium, with a half-life of sixty hours).
The most common (non-antidepressant) medications used for anxiety are summarized in the following charts

ANTIANXIETY MEDICATIONS

Long Acting Benzodiazepines (more than 24-hour half life)		
Brand Name	**Chemical**	**Average Daily Dosage (mg/day)**
Valium	diazepam	2-60
Librium	chlordiazepoxide	15-100
Centrax	prazepam	20-60
Klonopin	clonazepam	0.5-20
Short Acting Benzodiazepines (less than 24-hour half-life)		
Brand Name	**Chemical**	**Average Daily Dosage (mg/day)**
Serax	oxazepam	30-120

Ativan	lorazepam	0.5-10
Xanax	alprazolam	0.5-6
Other Antianxiety Medications		
Brand Name	**Chemical**	**Average Daily Dosage (mg/day)**
Buspar	buspirone	2-60

Rebound Activity

Some individuals, as the benzodiazepine level in their body declines, being to experience an increase in anxiety called rebound anxiety. In some cases this anxiety can be quite severe and frightening. This is more common for the short acting than long acting drugs. If the person taking the benzodiazepine notices an increase in anxiety before the next dosage, the physician should be consulted. Sometimes the person will be switched from a short acting to a long acting benzodiazepine or buspirone to prevent rebound anxiety.

Sedative-Hypnotic Medications

Sedative-hypnotic drugs are used in the treatment of agitation and to facilitate sleep. Similar to antianxiety drugs, the most commonly used sedative-hypnotic drugs are the benzodiazepines. A different type of sedative-hypnotic drugs is chloral hydrate. Antihistamines are also use sometimes as sedative-hypnotic drugs. The most common types of these drugs are listed in the following chart.

SEDATIVE-HYPNOTIC MEDICATIONS

Benzodiazepines		
Brand Name	**Chemical**	**Average Daily Dosage (mg/day)**
Dalmane	flurazepam	15-30
Restoril	temazepam	7.5-60
Halcion	triazolam	0.125-0.5
Other Sedative-Hypnotics		
Brand Name	**Chemical**	**Average Daily Dosage (mg/day)**
Noctec	chloral hydrate	500-2000
Ambien	Zolpidem	5-10
Eszopiclone	Lunesta	1-3
Antihistamines		
Brand Name	**Chemical**	**Average Daily Dosage (mg/day)**
Benadryl	diphenhydramine	25-300

Side Effects of Antianxiety and Sedative-Hypnotic Drugs

The most common side effect of these drugs is sedation and fatigue (except Buspar). With the long acting benzodiazepines, the sedation can persist for more that a day after the drug has been taken. Because of the sedating effects, the intake of alcohol should

be limited to not more than one drink per week, and appropriate cautions should be exercised when driving. The benzodiazepines can also affect memory and other cognitive abilities.

How Do These Drugs Work?
The different types of antianxiety and sedative-hypnotic medications operate by different mechanisms. In general, scientists believe these drugs influence neurotransmitters in the brain (chemicals in the nerve cells) that regulate arousal and anxiety.

Importance of Regular Medication
Taking medication on a regular basis can prevent fluctuations in symptoms that are due to changes over time in the amount of the drug in the body. It can be helpful to take medication at the same time each day so that it is part of the person's daily routine. It is also important for the person to meet regularly with his or her physician to have symptoms checked, discuss side effects, and have adjustments in medication made when necessary.

Common Questions about Antianxiety and Sedative-Hypnotic Medications
What if the Person Misses a Dose of medication?
The client should consult with his or her physician to find out what to do if a dose of medication is missed.

Are Antianxiety or Sedative-hypnotic medications addictive?
Benzodiazepines can be addictive, but the risk for dependence can be minimized by taking low doses and always staying within the prescribed dosage range. If a decision is made for the person to stop taking a benzodiazepine, the dose should be gradually tapered over a number of weeks to prevent withdrawal symptoms, rebound anxiety, or seizures.

How long should Antianxiety or Sedative-hypnotic medications be taken?
In many cases these drugs are given for a brief period of time (such as several weeks or months) to treat temporary increases of anxiety, agitation or sleep problems. Sometimes these medications are given over long periods of time when the symptoms are more sever and long lasting.

Consult the client's physician about any questions you have concerning this handout.