

Choosing Wisely®

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Insomnia and anxiety in older people

Sleeping pills are usually not the best solution

Almost one-third of older people in the United States take sleeping pills. These medicines are also sometimes called “sedative-hypnotics” or “tranquilizers.” They affect the brain and spinal cord.

Doctors prescribe some of these medicines for sleep problems. Some of these medicines also can be used to treat other conditions, such as anxiety or alcohol withdrawal. Sometimes, doctors also prescribe certain anti-depressants for sleep, even though that’s not what they’re designed to treat.

Most older adults should first try to treat their insomnia without medicines. According to the American Geriatrics Society, there are safer and better ways to improve sleep or reduce anxiety. Here’s why:

Sleeping pills may not help much.

Many ads say that sleeping pills help people get a full, restful night’s sleep. But studies show that this is not exactly true in real life. On average,

people who take one of these medicines sleep only a little longer and better than those who don’t take a medicine.



Sleeping pills can have serious side effects.

All sedative-hypnotic medicines have special risks for older adults. Seniors are likely to be more sensitive to the medicines’ effects than younger adults. And these medicines may stay in older people’s bodies longer. These medicines can cause confusion and memory problems that:

- Increase the risk of falls and hip fractures. These are common causes of hospital stays and death in older people.
- Increase the risk of car accidents.

The new “Z” medicines also have risks.

Most ads are for these new medicines. At first, they were thought to be safer. But recent studies suggest they have as much or more risk than the older sleep medicines.

Try treating without medicines first.

Get a thorough medical exam. Sleep problems can be caused by depression or anxiety, pain, restless leg syndrome, and many other conditions. Even if an exam does not find a cause, you should try other solutions before you try medicines.

Kinds of sleeping pills

All of these pills have risks, especially for older adults:

Barbiturates

- Secobarbital (Seconal and generic)
- Phenobarbital (Luminal and generic)

Benzodiazepines

For anxiety:

- Alprazolam (Xanax and generic)
- Diazepam (Valium and generic)
- Lorazepam (Ativan and generic)

For insomnia:

- Estazolam (generic only)
- Flurazepam (Dalmane and generic)
- Quazepam (Doral)
- Temazepam (Restoril and generic)
- Triazolam (Halcion and generic)

”Z” medicines

- Zolpidem (Ambien and generic)
- Eszopiclone (Lunesta and generic)
- Zaleplon (Sonata and generic)

Over-the-counter medicines may not be a good choice.

Side effects of some medicines can be especially bothersome for seniors: next-day drowsiness, confusion, constipation, dry mouth, and difficulty urinating. Avoid these over-the-counter sleep medicines:

- Diphenhydramine (Benadryl Allergy, Nytol, Sominex, and generic)
- Doxylamine (Unisom and generic)
- Advil PM (combination of ibuprofen and diphenhydramine)
- Tylenol PM (combination of acetaminophen and diphenhydramine)

When to try sleeping pills.

Consider these medicines if the sleep problems are affecting your quality of life and nothing else has helped. But your healthcare provider should watch you carefully to make sure that the medicine is helping and not causing bad side effects.

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