

Sleeping pills: Counting dangerous sheep

A sleeping pill may be effective at ending your sleep problems for the short term, but it could have negative consequences in the long run if not managed responsibly. That's why it is important to make sure you understand everything you need to know about sleeping pills, including potential side effects and the risk of dependence or addiction.

As adults, we require seven to eight hours of quality sleep per night to maintain good health. For many people this is an achievable goal, but there are others who struggle to accomplish this. One of the common causes is the sleep disorder insomnia: The South African Society of Sleep Medicine (SASSM) states that this affects about 30-40% of adults within any

given year, with about 10-15% indicating it as chronic and/or severe. Other causes for disturbed sleep include psychological causes like anxiety, stress and depression, underlying medical conditions, or prescription drugs such as high blood pressure medications, stimulants for ADHD and antidepressants. In these cases, a prescription sleeping pill may help people get through those sleepless nights. But experts agree they're not the best choice for the long term.

Types of sleeping pills

Most sleeping pills prescribed by doctors are classified as "sedative hypnotics", a specific class of drugs used to induce and/or maintain sleep. These include benzodiazepines, a specific class of medications used to treat anxiety but also often prescribed to help people sleep because of its sedative effects. Sedative hypnotics may be beneficial in the short term, but they are also potentially addictive, can cause memory and attention problems and have side effects. They are therefore usually not recommended for the long-term treatment of sleeping problems. Doctors usually only prescribe them for disorders such as long-lasting insomnia.

Side effects of sleeping pills

Sleeping pills come with significant risks and side effects, which many people don't realise. Common side effects of prescription sleeping pills may include



changes in appetite, dizziness, dry mouth or throat, diarrhoea and headaches. Some people also experience allergic reactions from sleeping pills that can cause difficulty breathing, chest pain, nausea and swelling. They can also interfere with normal breathing and be dangerous in people who

have certain chronic lung problems such as asthma, emphysema or forms of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Abusing sleeping pills

Many people underestimate the powerful grip sleeping pills can have over someone's

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life and the dangers of abusing these drugs. Most prescription sedatives and tranquilisers are very effective in treating anxiety, sleep disorders, and other medical conditions, but they are also very powerful and addictive. Misusing sedative hypnotics such as benzodiazepines could lead to memory and concentration problems. It can also have serious and potentially harmful side effects. Some signs of sleeping pill abuse include slurred speech, impaired concentration, uncoordinated movements and unusual euphoria. Other side effects vary from seizures to difficulty breathing, coma and, in some cases, death.

Medical schemes and sleeping pills

Medihelp will cover a maximum of 90 days' supply of sedative hypnotic per beneficiary per year from members' day-to-day / acute medicine benefits. The majority of sedative hypnotics make special mention in the package insert of such product that treatment should not exceed four weeks, including tapering period.

Natural ways of falling asleep

By practising good sleep habits, exercising and avoiding stimulants like excessive caffeine, alcohol and nicotine, you can often improve your sleep cycle naturally.

These days, there are also a variety of products and apps available which offer a solution for poor sleeping patterns, such as a programmable LED light bulb which promotes sleep. The light bulb

communicates with your smartphone via an app and can be programmed in different ways. A reddish light helps you to produce melatonin, while a white light helps to wake you up. You can also see what the temperature and the noise levels were during the night.

If you take a sleeping pill, keep the following in mind:

- Always consult with your doctor to get the correct prescription medication for your needs.
- Be aware of the possible side effects so that you can discontinue the medicine and phone your doctor immediately to avoid a potentially more serious health problem.
- Never use sleeping pills which were prescribed for someone else.
- Follow the instructions on the leaflet exactly.
- When stopping a prescription sleeping pill, do it under a doctor's supervision. Never go cold turkey, as this increases the risk of psychological side effects such as depression and suicidal thoughts.
- Limit the period of using any hypnotic to the shortest possible period. **é**

Sources:

<https://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/guide/understanding-the-side-effects-of-sleeping-pills#1>; <https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/298506/how-much-sleep-the-average-south-african-gets-each-night>; <https://www.sassm.org>; <https://www.addictioncenter.com/sleeping-pills/symptoms-signs>; <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/sleep/insomnia-causes-and-cures.htm>