

## Depressant Drugs

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### What are they?

Depressant drugs, also known as “downers”, refer to a large number of familiar, widely used chemicals. They are also described as sedative hypnotics, benzodiazepines, or barbiturates. Occasionally, some of these drugs are prescribed for medical purposes but many people use them recreationally to “relax”, “mellow-out”, or to take off the “edge” felt by using an “upper” (energizing drugs like speed or cocaine).

*These drugs can be dangerous when not taken as directed by a physician or pharmacist and can also be quite addictive.*

Depressant drugs include:

- Alcohol
- Barbiturates like Phenobarbital or Quaalude
- Benzodiazepines such as Valium, Lorazepam, and Klonopin
- Sedative-hypnotics such as Ambien or Sonata

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### What do they do?

Depressant drugs cause sedative effects such as relaxation, drowsiness and a feeling of being “mellow” at low doses. At high doses, they cause hypnotic effects, that is, they induce sleep. Because of this effect, these drugs have also been called sleeping pills.

Their primary effect is to depress or slow down central nervous system activity, resulting in slowed body and mental functions. Depressant drugs can cause effects closely resembling alcohol intoxication. As with alcohol intoxication, the operation of an automobile and other machines is especially dangerous. Motor coordination and visual perception may be greatly impaired.

These effects are intensified in higher doses. In other words, the more you take it, the more depressed your system becomes. This can eventually cause your body to just “shut down” and can cause death. Different drugs are lethal in different amounts or in different combinations.

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### What about tolerance?

A regular user of depressant drugs over a long period of time may develop tolerance to the effects of these drugs. This individual may require an increasing dose to produce the desired effects. Eventually, dependence/addiction develops and physical, as well as psychological withdrawal symptoms may occur when the drugs are no longer taken.

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### Kicking the habit

Dependence on depressant drugs is potentially one of the most dangerous of all chemical dependencies. If a person abruptly stops using a depressant drug, progressive restlessness, anxiety, irritability and possibly delirium and convulsions may occur. These symptoms may be fatal without proper medical attention. The withdrawal process from all depressant drugs, including alcohol, should be medically monitored.

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### How does it affect you?

Long term use, as well as an occasional or one-time use of larger doses, may interfere with rapid eye movement (R.E.M.) sleep, which is essential for normal healthy functioning. The effects of a single dose of a depressant drug usually last from four to six hours, although the effects of Phenobarbital last considerably longer.

## What are the effects of combining drugs?

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The use of a combination of depressant drugs is very dangerous. Because of the way that most depressant drugs react with each other, taking one dose of one depressant drug and one dose of another may have a combined effect of three doses, or seven or even more.

Depressants used in combination create effects which multiply: one plus one does NOT equal two. The more potent or stronger the depressant, the more likely that this reaction will occur. Therefore, using any depressant drug while drinking alcohol IS NOT SAFE. Alcohol ties up the liver in its metabolism, so other drugs continue to circulate through the body prolonging their effects.

*The number one cause of drug overdose death in the United States  
is the use of depressant drugs and alcohol in combination.*

Please remember, don't mix your drugs and have any depressant drug prescription reviewed regularly by your healthcare provider.

## For More Information:

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