

Benzodiazepine Use May Raise Risk of Alzheimer's Disease

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If you have ever taken Valium, Xanax, or some other benzodiazepine to calm your nerves or sleep better, you may have felt woozy or hungover the next day. Experts have long assumed that people's heads would clear once they stopped taking the drug. That may not be the case. A study published last night by the journal BMJ suggests that benzodiazepine use may promote the development of dementia.

A team of researchers from France and Canada linked benzodiazepine use to an increased risk of being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. In the study, the greater a person's cumulative dose of benzodiazepines, the higher his or her risk of Alzheimer's.

The researchers relied on a database maintained by the Quebec health insurance program. From it, they identified nearly 2,000 men and women over age 66 who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. They randomly selected more than 7,000 others without Alzheimer's who were matched for age and sex to those with the disease. Once the groups were set, the researchers looked at the drug prescriptions during the five to six years preceding the Alzheimer's diagnosis.

People who had taken a benzodiazepine for three months or less had about the same dementia risk as those who had never taken one. Taking the drug for three to six months raised the risk of developing Alzheimer's by 32%, and taking it for more than six months boosted the risk by 84%.

The type of drug taken also mattered. People who were on a long-acting benzodiazepine like diazepam (Valium) and flurazepam (Dalmane) were at greater risk than those on a short-acting one like triazolam (Halcion), lorazepam (Ativan), alprazolam (Xanax), and temazepam (Restoril).

Benzodiazepines approved for use in the United States:

alprazolam (Xanax), chlordiazepoxide (Librium), clonazepam (Klonopin), clorazepate (Tranxene), diazepam (Valium), estazolam (Prosom), flurazepam (Dalmane), lorazepam (Ativan), oxazepam (Serax), temazepam (Restoril), triazolam (Halcion), quazepam (Doral)