

# Well



# & Wiser

What to know about  
**pain and anxiety medications**

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**Did you know?**

Opioids and benzodiazepines (benzos) can slow breathing and increase risk of death.

# What we've learned about aging and using these medications.

Opioids and benzodiazepines are strong medications that may be prescribed for pain, anxiety or sleep issues. Examples include:

- Hydrocodone (Vicodin®)
- Oxycodone (Percocet®, OxyContin®)
- Alprazolam (Xanax®)
- Clonazepam (Klonopin®)
- Lorazepam (Ativan®)
- Diazepam (Valium®)

As we age, our bodies work differently. We carry less water. Metabolism slows. The liver and kidneys work more slowly.

This changes how your body processes medication, causing:

- Extreme sleepiness or difficulty waking
- Feeling confused or unsteady
- Slow or shallow breathing

## Why that could matter to you



**Memory issues**



**Loss of balance and increased risk of falls**



**Increased risk of pneumonia**



**Increased risk of side effects**



## Did you know?

Overdose can look like someone is just sleeping. If you can't wake them, call 911.

## Mixing risks

Mixing opioids and benzos or taking them with other medications can have effects like drowsiness, loss of balance, or even death. Talk with your healthcare provider if you are also taking:

- Other opioids or benzos
- Alcohol or cannabis
- Sleep or anxiety medications
- Muscle relaxants
- Cold or allergy medications

## What to watch for

- Loss of consciousness
- Drowsiness
- Dizziness
- Slow or shallow breathing
- Nausea

## What you can do

Don't stop or adjust medication on your own. It can be life threatening. Talk with your doctor and figure out next steps together.



### Ask your doctor

- Is this still the right dose for me?
- Is there a risk taking with alcohol?
- Are there interactions with my other medications?
- Are there alternatives to medications for my symptoms?
- Am I at risk for dependence or addiction?

### Have naloxone available and learn how to use it

This safe, easy-to-use medication can reverse an opioid overdose. Even if you never expect to need it, having it nearby can make a difference.

Order free naloxone nasal spray at [vadic.VTHelpLink.org](http://vadic.VTHelpLink.org)



## Quick facts

- The sedative effects of opioids and benzos impair balance, coordination, and reaction time.
- There is a higher risk of pneumonia with use of either medication.
- Our aging bodies cannot process medications as quickly, meaning lower doses can still lead to toxic levels.
- Opioids and benzos can be addictive.


### Help for you or someone you care about

Concerned about your or a loved one's use of pain or anxiety medications? Call VT Helplink for free, confidential support at **802-565-4565** or visit [VTHelplink.com](https://www.vt-helplink.com), 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.


**If someone is not waking up or having trouble breathing, call 911.**



To find resources and support near you, call:

 **Support and Services at Home (SASH)**  
**802-863-2224**

 **Vermont Area Agencies on Aging Senior HelpLine**  
**1-800-642-5119**

 **Vermont Department of Health**  
**[HealthVermont.gov/WellAndWiser](https://www.healthvermont.gov/WellAndWiser)**

