

MEMORANDUM

To: All prescribers across Hertfordshire

Copy to: All medical directors, community pharmacists

From: Hertfordshire Medicines Management Committee (HMMC)

Date: 8th October 2018

Subject: Benzodiazepines and risk of suicide

Dear prescribers

In a recent letter to Chief Pharmacists and Medical Directors from NHS England and NHS Improvement (see embedded document), the potential risks of suicide associated with benzodiazepine prescribing and withdrawal were highlighted. In view of this letter, HMMC would like to remind prescribers:

- Given the risks associated with the use of benzodiazepines, patients should be prescribed the lowest effective dose for the shortest time possible. Maximum duration of treatment should be 4 weeks, including the dose-tapering phase.
- There may be an increased risk of suicidal behaviour during use of benzodiazepines due to potential disinhibition.
- There is an increased risk of potential for suicide during withdrawal from benzodiazepines.
- Consider the risks of potential suicidal behaviour prior to initiating benzodiazepines.
- Patients who are receiving benzodiazepines for extended periods of time should be reviewed by their prescribers on a regular basis so that their suitability for long term prescribing can be assessed.
- When considering withdrawal of benzodiazepines, assess whether it is a suitable time for the individual, enquire about
 - Symptoms of depression. Withdrawing these drugs can worsen symptoms of clinical depression. The priority is to manage the depression first, before attempting drug withdrawal.
 - Symptoms of anxiety. Withdrawing treatment when significant symptoms of anxiety are present is likely to make symptoms worse and is therefore unlikely to succeed. However, when symptoms are reasonably well controlled and stable it may be possible to attempt careful drug withdrawal.
- The need for regular and close monitoring of patients who are withdrawing from benzodiazepines.
- The need to consider the particular risks associated with shorter acting benzodiazepines.

Prescribers are encouraged to consider the need for specialist advice from the local substance misuse service – CGL Spectrum. Where appropriate, CGL Spectrum will consider taking over the management of benzodiazepine withdrawal for a patient who presents with a complex addictive personality and has been unsuccessful in withdrawing from this medication under primary care.

CGL Spectrum can be contacted via 0800 652 3169 or e-mail on Herts@cgl.org.uk

THE CGL Spectrum policy on the management of benzodiazepines is embedded below

For further information consult relevant guidance from NICE (<https://cks.nice.org.uk/benzodiazepine-and-z-drug-withdrawal>) and The British Association for Psychopharmacology (<https://www.bap.org.uk/docdetails.php?docID=77>).



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