Benzodiazepines Improperly Prescribed; Raises Concern in the Midst of Opioid Crisis

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As the opioid epidemic continues to affect the nation, another powerful type of drug is being improperly prescribed despite its high risk of addiction. Statistics show a dangerous trend leading to abuse and overdose. At the center of this deadly new trend are benzodiazepines (BZD).

More Americans are taking BZD, sedatives that are prescribed for a number of conditions. Recent studies suggest that even more are abusing them.

Researchers believe that the risk of developing a dependence on these highly addictive drugs is increasing, making it particularly lethal at a time where more people are dying of an opioid-related overdose. Benzodiazepines, when mixed with opioid painkillers can cause a fatal overdose.

According to a 2016 study, there was a 570 percent increase in substance abuse treatment admissions with both BZD and prescription opioid abuse from 2000 to 2010. Click the link to see Baltimore's top rehab placement programs.

?Benzodiazepines are great medicines in the sense that a person gets immediate relief after taking it,? says Sumit Agarwal, MD, a doctor at Brigham and Women?s Hospital in Boston. ?With most other medications we use for anxiety, we tell patients, ?Keep taking it for a month or two to see a difference.? We appreciate the benefits and we underappreciate the risks.?

Agarwal recently led a study that found the number of doctor visits that ended with a prescription for BZD nearly doubled between the years 2003 and 2015. He said he took interest in the subject after meeting a new patient who was taking high doses of a benzodiazepine called clonazepam, an anti-anxiety medication known by the brand name Klonopin.

?She was taking it multiple times a day, and she?d been on it for a decade-plus when I inherited her. Over the years, her daily dosage had gone up until it was about four times the amount she started taking, and she took it more frequently. Despite that, she was still ?crippled by anxiety,? he said. ?This was kind of the opposite of what I learned in medical school?that it?s a good medication for intermittent use and not chronic use, especially since it sounded very similar to the opioid epidemic we?re in the middle of.?

This is what made Agarwal curious about the number of prescriptions for BZD that was being written every year. The research team noticed the significant increase and realized the horrible implications?that many more people could die if doctors are not careful with their prescriptions and if patients were not using their medications properly.

Benzodiazepines work by slowing the activity within the body?s central nervous system. This makes the patient drowsy and calm at the same time. Drugs that are classified as BZD include common brand names like Valium (diazepam), and the anti-anxiety medication Xanax (alprazolam).

Other BZDs like Ativan (lorazepam) and Klonopin are often used to prevent epileptic seizures.

These drugs have been around since the 1960s. And the reason they are still being prescribed is the fact that, like opioids, they do have medical uses that benefit certain patients. BZDs, for instance, are useful for treating anxiety and insomnia, just like how opioids are great for controlling pain.

However, these types of drugs are highly addictive, and so they must be prescribed and used sparingly. These substances are habit-forming. Even patients who take them specifically for their conditions can sometimes experience the side effects or even develop dependence. It is important to follow the prescription carefully and keep in touch with the doctor who prescribed the drug in case of any side effects.

?They are certainly much safer than barbiturates, which are what they replaced,? says Donovan Maust, MD, a geriatric psychiatrist at the University of Michigan medical school. ?On their own, they?re unlikely to cause

an overdose. However, in combination with other things, such as opioids, that very much is a concern.?

?Ideally, these would be prescribed for people with an actual anxiety disorder, as opposed to people who have a stressful day or a difficult day,? he added. ?Just as an all-purpose stress reliever wouldn?t be a great reason to be taking a benzo.?

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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