Using Opioids Safely: Benzodiazepines and the Opioid Epidemic

Product Labeling Changes
In August 2016, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced a requirement for class-wide changes to drug labeling, including a black box warning for opioid analgesics and benzodiazepines identifying serious risks associated with using these medications at the same time. Risks include extreme sleepiness, respiratory depression, coma and death.

Among the findings by the FDA:

- From 2004 to 2011, the rate of emergency department visits involving non-medical use of both drug classes increased significantly, with overdose deaths (from taking prescribed or greater than prescribed doses) involving both drug classes nearly tripling during that period to 31%.
- The number of patients who were prescribed both an opioid analgesic and benzodiazepine increased by 41 percent between 2002 and 2014.

Other studies revealed the following:

Overdose deaths involving benzodiazepines increased more than 7-fold from 1999 (a total of 1135) to 2015 (a total of 8791).

In the previous decade, 27% of veterans who received opioids analgesics also received benzodiazepines. Benzodiazepine use was associated with an increased risk of death from drug overdose in a dose-response fashion.

In one study of patients with chronic pain in an interdisciplinary pain rehabilitation program, nearly one-third of patients were taking benzodiazepines upon admission; use was more likely in female patients and was associated with higher depression scores.

In privately insured populations, the percentage of opioids users also using a benzodiazepine doubled between 2001 and 2013 in association with an increased risk of inpatient admission for opioid overdose.
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Citations

FDA requires strong warnings for opioid analgesics, prescription opioid cough products, and benzodiazepine labeling related to serious risks and death from combined use. https://www.fda.gov/newsevents/newsroom/pressannouncements/ucm518697.htm


