Fear of Flying

Binscombe Medical Centre Aug 2023

We are often asked to prescribe sedative drugs, such as diazepam (Valium), for fear of flying. These drugs belong to a group called Benzodiazepines (e.g. Diazepam/ Lorazepam/Temazepam/Alprazolam/ Clonazepam). They are sedating drugs which have been in use since the 1960s for treatment of a wide range of conditions. However, we now know them to cause a wide range of serious side effects, be addictive in long term use and are sadly a drug of abuse. They are now classified as a class C/Schedule IV controlled drug.

We have recently agreed a practice policy that we will no longer prescribe these drugs for fear of flying. There are a number of good reasons why prescribing of drugs such as diazepam is not safe or recommended

Safety in flight

Benzodiazepines and other sedative drugs are no longer recommended for treatment of phobias because other treatments are safer and more effective.

Diazepam is a sedative (central nervous system depressant), which means it makes you sleepy and slows reaction times. If there is an emergency during a flight, it may affect your ability to concentrate, follow instructions and react to the situation. This could have serious safety consequences for you and others.  (See the outcomes of flights BA2276 on 08.09.2015 vs BA28M on 22.08.1985)

Occasionally there can be a paradoxical reaction. Whilst most people find these medicines sedating, a small number of people become agitated, aggressive or confused. These medicines can also cause disinhibition and lead to abnormal behaviours. This could impact on your safety as well as that of other passengers.

Benzodiazepines added to alcohol consumption causes an increase in the risk posed by many of the points above, and many (nervous) flyers will consume alcohol in the terminal before boarding and during their flight, despite medical advice to refrain from doing so.

Risk of Thrombosis

Sedative drugs can make you fall asleep, however this is not a natural sleep. This means you won’t move around as much as during natural sleep and this can increase your risk of developing a blood clot (DVT) in your leg or lung. Blood clots are dangerous and can be fatal. This risk is greater if your flight is longer than four hours.

Respiratory Depression

The sedative effects of these drugs can affect breathing and cause low oxygen levels, which could be life threatening, especially with the lower circulating oxygen levels on an aeroplane, in people with breathing problems or when combined with alcohol.

Legalities in Foreign Domains

In some countries it is illegal to import such drugs, e.g. in the Middle East, and so passengers will need to use a different strategy for the homeward bound journey and / or any subsequent legs of a journey.

Standard GP indemnity does not cover treatments initiated outside the UK, so your GP would only be insured for medicines administered within the UK.

NICE

According to the prescribing guidelines doctors follow (British National Formulary) diazepam is not recommended in treating phobic states. It also states that “the use of benzodiazepines to treat short-term ‘mild’ anxiety is inappropriate.”  Your doctor would be taking a significant legal risk by prescribing against these guidelines. They are only licensed short term for a crisis in generalised anxiety.

NICE guidelines suggest that these medications are only advised for the short term use for a crisis in generalised anxiety disorder in which case a person is not fit to fly. Fear of flying in isolation is not a generalised anxiety disorder

As a practice we understand that fear of flying is real and frightening and we do not underestimate the impact it can have. Whilst we can discuss an approach to the fear of flying, we will no longer prescribe sedating medication.

We would want to advise tackling this phobia in an alternative way. We have no affiliations with any one course or site but these links may be of help.

[Overview - Phobias - NHS (www.nhs.uk)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/overview/)

[Fear of flying course | Fearless Flyer (easyjet.com)](https://www.fearlessflyer.easyjet.com/)

[Flying Without Fear | Courses to Conquer Your Fear of Flying](https://www.flyingwithoutfear.com/)

[Fear of flying courses from British Airways™ | Flying With Confidence](https://flyingwithconfidence.com/)

[How To Deal With Travel Anxiety During The Holidays, According To Science (bustle.com)](https://www.bustle.com/p/how-to-deal-with-travel-anxiety-during-the-holidays-according-to-science-13201169)