

## **Benzodiazepines and Anxiety**

The principal drawback of benzodiazepines, particularly short-acting medications such as alprazolam (Xanax), involves their ability to produce physical dependency,<sup>18</sup> manifested by a withdrawal syndrome on abrupt discontinuation. Even with gradual tapering, it may be difficult for some patients to discontinue benzodiazepine therapy.<sup>19</sup> The benzodiazepines have also been known to produce interdose rebound anxiety requiring multiple daily dosing.

Although benzodiazepines are considered an appropriate first-line treatment in certain cases of panic disorder (e.g., when rapid symptom relief is needed), discontinuation difficulties have relegated these medications to a second- or third-line consideration. The most common use for benzodiazepines is to stabilize severe initial symptoms until another treatment (e.g., an SSRI or cognitive behavioral therapy) becomes effective.

Despite its acute efficacy for the treatment of panic disorder, benzodiazepines (BZs) are associated with a withdrawal syndrome that closely mimics anxiety sensations, leading to difficulty with treatment discontinuation and often disorder relapse. An exposure-based cognitive-behavioral treatment for BZ discontinuation, Panic Control Treatment for BZ Discontinuation (PCT-BD) targets the fear of these sensations and has demonstrated efficacy in preventing disorder relapse and facilitating successful BZ discontinuation among patients with panic disorder.

## **Benzodiazepines alternatives: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**

In cognitive behavioral treatment of anxiety, patients record, examine, and analyze their thoughts and feelings, with special attention to those that provoke or relieve anxiety. While the therapist helps them to become aware of unrealistic thinking, they also learn new ways to respond to anxiety-provoking situations, and practice the techniques of exposure and systematic desensitization.

In most studies, cognitive behavioral therapy is found to be as effective as benzodiazepines and other medications, and its impact often lasts longer. A combination of drugs and cognitive behavioral therapy may be more effective than either alone.

## **Benzodiazepines alternatives: Antidepressants**

In general, antidepressants, especially selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as *sertraline* (Zoloft), are as effective as and safer than benzodiazepines for the long-term treatment of panic disorder and generalized anxiety. Antidepressants have the advantage of relieving depression as well as anxiety, and they create less risk of dependence. But because antidepressants take weeks to work, benzodiazepines are often prescribed to tide patients over. The dose of the benzodiazepine is gradually reduced as the antidepressant takes effect.