



Benzodiazepines and Alzheimer's

Article Summary

- A large study examining individuals with Alzheimer's disease found that individuals regularly taking a benzodiazepine were more likely to develop the disease.
- Benzodiazepines are regularly prescribed to treat anxiety and insomnia, but recent research has showed that regularly consuming these drugs may have cognitive side effects.
- In this article below we discuss the study, a potential explanation for the findings, and the options for individuals currently prescribed a benzodiazepines.

A group of researchers from Canada and France have linked benzodiazepine use to an increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease or dementia.

Benzodiazepines are a large class of drugs often used to treat anxiety or difficulty sleeping.

The study compared a group of 2,000 men and women over the age of 66 with Alzheimer's disease with a group of 7,000 individuals of similar age and sex without Alzheimer's disease.

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The researchers found that individuals whom had taken a benzodiazepine for an extended period of time had a significantly higher chance of developing Alzheimer's disease. Individuals who had taken a benzodiazepine for 3 to 6 months increased their risk of developing Alzheimer's disease by 32% and those who had taken it for more than six months increased their risk by 84%.

Researchers also noted that individuals taking short-acting benzodiazepines were less affected than those taking long-acting one.

Researchers at Pennsylvania State University theorize that the link between benzodiazepines and dementia is the neurotransmitter gamma-Aminobutyric acid, or GABA. GABA affects the brain by decreasing the speed that neurons function, in essence, GABA "calms the brain."

Benzodiazepines primary effect is to increase the efficiency of GABA, producing the calming effect many individuals associate with this class of drugs. The danger lies in the fact that when taken for a prolonged time, benzodiazepines may suppress the normal functioning of the brain, possibly impairing the brain's ability to form new memories, perform cognitive tasks, and repair itself.

Recommendation

The danger of benzodiazepines may be a case of, "too much of a good thing." The neurotransmitter GABA can help to calm our minds in times of stress or action, but when used constantly, it seems to impair the normal functioning of the brain.

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Individuals who are regularly taking a benzodiazepine and concerned about memory loss should speak with their physician. They should consider their frequency of consumption, type of benzodiazepine (long-acting vs. slow acting), and reason for taking it.

The American Geriatrics Society recently added benzodiazepines to their list of "inappropriate medications for treating insomnia and agitation".

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