

July 2015

### What are sedatives and tranquillisers?

'Sedatives' and 'tranquillisers' are commonly used terms for a group of medicines which depress, slow down or calm the brain and central nervous system. Benzodiazepines ('Benzos') are the most common type of drug in this group, but other drugs with the same effects are also included.<sup>1</sup>

### What do sedatives and tranquillisers do?

Sedatives and tranquillisers can be used as hypnotic or anti-anxiety agents, depending on the dosage and on the time of day that they are taken. Hypnotics are used to treat insomnia (lack of adequate restful sleep) which is causing distress. Anti-anxiety drugs (anxiolytics), such as benzodiazepines, are used to obtain relief from severe and disabling anxiety.<sup>1</sup>

### How do we know how many people use sedatives and tranquillisers in Ireland?

The 2010/11 drug and alcohol survey of the general population done by the [National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol](#) (NACDA) and the Northern Ireland Public Health Information and Research Branch (PHIRB) included questions about sedatives and tranquillisers.<sup>1</sup> Face-to-face interviews took place with respondents aged 15–64 normally resident in households in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This type of survey is not designed to include people who do not normally live in private households (such as prisoners or hostel dwellers).

### How many people use sedatives and tranquillisers in Ireland?

The 2010/11 general population survey involved 7,669 people (5,134 in Ireland and 2,535 in Northern Ireland). The results for Ireland showed that:

- 14% of the population had used sedatives and tranquillisers at least once.
- Women were more likely to report taking them than men.
- Use was higher among 35–64-year-olds than among younger adults (aged 15–34).
- The average age at which these drugs were first taken was 30 years.
- Almost all (95%) of those who used these drugs had got them on prescription.

### Use among young people

The [European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs](#) (ESPAD) collects comparable data on substance use among 15–16-year-old students in 30 countries. According to the 2011 ESPAD report, 9% of Irish students (aged 15–16) reported that they had taken prescribed tranquillisers or

sedatives at some point in their lives, and a further 3% had taken them without a prescription.<sup>2</sup>

### **How many people receive treatment for sedative and tranquilliser use?**

The [National Drug Treatment Reporting System](#) (NDTRS) provides data on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland.<sup>a</sup> The most recent published data from the NDTRS<sup>3</sup> shows that:

The number of cases entering treatment and reporting a benzodiazepine as their main problem drug increased from 75 in 2005 to 719 in 2013.

Of the 719 cases who reported benzodiazepines as their main problem drug:

- 309 were new cases.
- 233 lived in Dublin.
- 455 (63%) were men.
- 45 (6%) were aged under 18 years; 508 (70%) were aged 18–34; 111 (15%) were aged 35–44; and 5 (1%) were aged 45–64.
- 551 (76%) used benzodiazepines with other drugs.
- 393 (55%) used benzodiazepines daily, 143 (20%) used it between two and six times per week, 37 (5%) used it once per week or less, and 117 (16%) had not used it in the last month.

The most recent figure for benzodiazepine as an additional problem drug is 1,795 in 2013.<sup>4</sup>

### **How many people die from misuse of sedatives and tranquillisers?**

The [National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#) (NDRDI) is a database of cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, and deaths among drug users and people who are alcohol dependent. Over a third (35%) of poisonings in 2012 involved benzodiazepines. Benzodiazepines were implicated in 123 deaths in 2012 a decrease of 29% on the 2011 figure of 173 deaths. Of the 123 individual deaths in 2012 in which benzodiazepines were implicated, 40 cases involved two or more types of benzodiazepine.<sup>5</sup>

Of the 77 individual deaths in 2012 in which antidepressants were implicated, 10 deaths involved more than one type of antidepressant. Citalopram is the most common antidepressant implicated in these deaths and was implicated in over a quarter (21, 27.3%) of individual deaths involving antidepressants in 2012.

### **Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies**

According to the [Hospital In-Patient Enquiry Scheme](#) (HIPE), there were 4,422 cases of non-fatal overdose discharged from Irish hospitals in 2012. Benzodiazepines accounted for 924 (21%) of the positive drug findings in relation to these cases.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>a</sup> The NDTRS contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include the number in continuous care.

## What does the law say about sedatives and tranquillisers?

Under the Medicinal Products (Prescription and Control of Supply) Regulations 2003–2008, a prescription medication can only be supplied in accordance with a prescription, and the supply must be made from a registered pharmacy by or under the personal supervision of a registered pharmacist. It is illegal for prescription medicines to be supplied through mail-order or internet sites. A person who has in his possession a prescription medicine containing a substance controlled under the misuse of drugs legislation for the purpose of selling or otherwise supplying it is guilty of an offence under that legislation.

Changes to regulations under the misuse of drugs legislation are expected in 2015 which will introduce stricter controls on benzodiazepines and an initiative to tackle overprescribing. You can find more information about Irish drug laws, offences and penalties on the [Citizens Information Board website](#).

## Seizures of sedatives and tranquillisers

The [Forensic Science Laboratory](#) (FSL) report on drugs seized by Garda. In 2014 the FSL reported on 4,004 grams and 140,171 tablets of benzodiazepines, 15 grams and 22,161 tablets of sleeping tablets

For more information on sedatives and tranquillisers please refer to the following sources:

1. National Advisory Committee on Drugs & Public Health Information and Research Branch (2012) [Drug use in Ireland and Northern Ireland. 2010/11 drug prevalence survey: sedatives or tranquillisers and anti-depressants results](#). Bulletin 6. Dublin: National Advisory Committee on Drugs.
2. Hibell B, Guttormsson U, Ahlstrom S, Balakireva O, Bjarnason T, Kokkevi A and Kraus L (2012) [The 2011 ESPAD report: substance use among students in 36 European countries](#). Stockholm: The Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN), EMCDDA and Council of Europe.
3. [Treatment data](#) National Document Centre interactive tables.
4. Preliminary unpublished data from the NDTRS.
5. Health Research Board (2014) [Drug-related deaths and deaths among drug users in Ireland: 2012 figures from the National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#) Dublin: Health Research Board.
6. Health Research Board (2013) [2014 National Report \(2013 data\) to the EMCDDA by the Reitox National Focal Point. Ireland: new developments, trends](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.

See also Bellerose D *et al.* (2010) [Problem benzodiazepine use in Ireland: treatment \(2003 to 2008\) and deaths \(1998 to 2007\)](#). HRB Trends Series 9. Dublin: Health Research Board.

This Factsheet may be cited as follows:

National Documentation Centre on Drug Use (2015) *Sedatives and tranquillisers: the Irish situation*. NDC Factsheet. Dublin: National Documentation Centre on Drug Use. [www.drugsandalcohol.ie/19644](http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/19644)

### Other Factsheets in this series:

[Cannabis: the Irish situation](#)

[Cocaine: the Irish situation](#)

[Opiates: the Irish situation](#)

\*\*\*\*\*

## National Documentation Centre on Drug Use – Find the evidence

NDC website: [www.drugsandalcohol.ie](http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie)

### Repository of Irish research on alcohol and drugs

- Reports, journal articles, theses and other research outputs
- Current research projects
- News service and reports of Dáil debates

### Research library

- Books, reports, scholarly publications and grey literature
- Scientific journals
- Bibliographic databases

### Key resources

- Fact sheets – data on drugs and alcohol
- Interactive tables of drug treatment data
- Evidence-based reviews and guidelines
- Online directory of drug and alcohol courses

### Information services

- Document supply
- Query response
- Information literacy sessions
- Newsletter and tables of contents service

## National Documentation Centre on Drug Use

Health Research Board  
Grattan House  
67–72 Lower Mount Street  
Dublin 2, Ireland

**t** +353 1 2345 175  
**e** [ndc@hrb.ie](mailto:ndc@hrb.ie)  
**w** [www.drugsandalcohol.ie](http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie)  
@NDCIreland

