

Factsheet – Sedatives and tranquillisers: the Irish situation

April 2019

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.¹

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.¹

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

Every four years the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol (NACDA) and the Northern Ireland Public Health Information and Research Branch (PHIRB) commission a survey of the general population to estimate the number of people in Ireland who use drugs and alcohol.¹ Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+^a 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 or tranquillisers in Ireland?

The 2014/15 survey involved 9,505 people (7,005 in Ireland and 2,500 in Northern Ireland). The results for Ireland showed that¹:

- The lifetime prevalence of sedatives or tranquillisers for adults aged 15-64 in 2014/15 is 13.1%, 6.1% in the last year, and 3.3% used in the last month.
- Lifetime usage of sedatives or tranquillisers is higher amongst females than males across all age groups (15.3% versus 10.8%)
- Use was higher among 65+ year-olds (21.4%) than all other age groups.
- Using sedatives or tranquillisers for 20 days or more is more common in older adults (64.1%) than younger adults (39.3%) and highest in those aged over 65 (73.5%).

^a In the most recent survey 2014/15 the sample population was extended from 15-64 years to include all those aged 15+ years. 14.3% of this population had used sedatives or tranquillisers at least once

- Males are more likely to report getting sedatives or tranquillisers from someone they know (6.4% of males vs. 1.4% of females)
- Young adults are more likely than older adults to report the same (10.1% of young adults vs. 3.6% of older adults report getting sedatives or tranquillisers from someone they know).
- Analysis of sedative or tranquilliser prevalence by socio-economic group status shows that lifetime (21.8%), last year (12.3%) and last month rates (9.4%) are highest in Group E (all those dependent on the state long term).

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 2015 ESPAD report, 11% of Irish students (aged 15–16) reported that they had taken prescribed tranquillisers or sedatives at some point in their lives, and a further 2.8% had taken them without a prescription. Of 37 students who used non-prescribed tranquilisers or sedatives, 28 were aged 14 - 16 and 3 reported being 11 years old or younger. 20% of respondents said it was fairly easy or very easy to obtain sedatives or tranquilisers.²

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.^b The most recent published data from the NDTRS³ shows that:

The number of cases treated for Z-drugs has increased from 0.1% in 2010, to 0.9% in 2017. Z-drugs have begun to feature more prominently as additional problem drugs. More cases reported a Z-drug as an additional problem drug (334) than a main problem drug (82) in 2017. The proportion who reported Z-drugs as an additional problem drug increased from 2.8% in 2011 to 6.5% in 2017.

Benzodiazepines were the main problem for 868 (9.7%) of cases in 2017. Since 2013, the proportion of cases treated for benzodiazepines has been relatively stable. 290 (8.9%) were new cases.

Benzodiazepines (36.2%) were the second most common additional drug reported among cases with polydrug use in 2017.

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. Prescription or over the counter drugs were implicated in 73% (n=258) of all poisoning deaths in 2016.

Benzodiazepines continue to be the most common prescription drug group implicated in poisoning deaths.⁴

^b 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.

Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies

According to the [Hospital In-Patient Enquiry Scheme \(HIPE\)](#), there were 3,956 cases of non-fatal overdose discharged from Irish hospitals in 2015. There was evidence of benzodiazepines in 18% (716) of cases.⁵

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 (Amendment) Bill 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 Garda send drugs seized to the [laboratory of Forensic Science Ireland \(FSI\)](#) for analysis.

Seizures of a selection of benzodiazepines and Z-hypnotics analysed by FSI in 2014 (the most recent data available) included 201 seizures of Alprazolam, 420 seizures of Diazepam and 125 seizures of Zopiclone.⁶ According to the 2017 Garda annual report 16,341 grams of benzodiazepines were seized with a value €1,374,908.⁷

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

1. National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol, Northern Ireland. Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. (2018) [Prevalence of drug use and gambling in Ireland & drug use in Northern Ireland. 2014/15 drug prevalence survey: prescription drug use results. Bulletin 5. Dublin: Department of Health.](#)
2. Taylor, Keishia and Babineau, Kate and Keogan, Sheila and Whelan, Ellen and Clancy, Luke (2016) [ESPAD 2015: European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs in Ireland.](#) Dublin: Department of Health.
3. Health Research Board (2019) [Drug Treatment in Ireland NDTRS 2011 to 2017.](#) Dublin: Health Research Board.
4. Health Research Board. (2019) [National Drug-Related Deaths Index 2004 to 2016 data.](#) Dublin: Health Research Board.
5. Health Research Board. Irish National Focal Point to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. (2018) [Ireland: national report for 2017 - harms and harm reduction.](#) Dublin: Health Research Board.
6. Health Research Board. Irish National Focal Point to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs

and Drug Addiction. (2016) [Ireland: national report for 2015 - drug markets and crime](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.

7. An Garda Siochana. (2018) [An Garda Siochana: annual report 2017](#). An Garda Siochana, Dublin.

See also: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. (2018) [Perspectives on drugs: the misuse of benzodiazepines among high-risk opioid users in Europe](#). Lisbon: EMCDDA

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HRB National Drugs Library

Health Research Board
Grattan House
67-72 Lower Mount Street
Dublin 2, Ireland
t +353 1 2345 175
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