

# Half of veterans who died from opioid overdoses also received benzos

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In a recent study, nearly half of all veterans who died from drug overdoses while prescribed opioids for pain were also receiving benzodiazepines, or benzos, which are common medications for the treatment of anxiety, insomnia and alcohol withdrawal. Veterans prescribed higher doses of benzodiazepines while concurrently receiving opioids were at greater risk of overdose death than those on lower doses of benzodiazepines. The results of the study by researchers from Rhode Island Hospital, Boston Medical Center, and the Veteran Affairs Ann Arbor Healthcare System were published online in the *BMJ* today.

"The risk of receiving both opioids and benzodiazepines during this six-year period was approximately four times higher than in those who received opioids alone," said Tae Woo Park, M.D., attending physician at Rhode Island Hospital.

"From a public health perspective, this is deeply troubling, because [drug overdoses](#) are a leading cause of death in the U.S. and prescribing benzodiazepines to patients taking opioids for pain is quite common. In 2010, 75 percent of pharmaceutical-related drug-overdose deaths involved opioids. As we learn more about pharmaceuticals and how they interact with each other, we can try to reduce the risk of harm to patients."

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is the largest integrated health care system in the U.S., serving nearly nine million former military personnel across 150 hospitals and 800 outpatient centers. Patient records of [veterans](#) who died from drug overdoses while receiving medical services as an outpatient at the VHA between October 2004 and September 2009 were examined for the relationship between the opioids and benzodiazepines when prescribed concurrently.

Common [opioids](#) include the well-known brands Vicodin, Percocet and OxyContin; and the generic formularies are morphine, codeine, oxycodone,

hydrocodone, fentanyl and methadone. The most common brands of [benzodiazepines](#) are Xanax, Valium and Klonopin, and common generic forms are alprazolam, chlordiazepoxide, clonazepam, diazepam, lorazepam and temazepam. The drugs are often used for treating anxiety disorders, insomnia and [alcohol withdrawal](#).

**More information:** Study: [BMJ](#)

Provided by Lifespan

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