

PRACTICE POLICY REGARDING PRESCRIBING DIAZEPAM FOR FLYING

People often come to us requesting the doctor to prescribe diazepam for fear of flying or assist with sleep during flights. Diazepam is a sedative, which means it makes you sleepy and more relaxed. There a number of reasons why prescribing this drug is not recommended:

* According to the prescribing guidelines doctors follow, diazepam is contraindicated (not allowed) in treating phobic states. It also states that “the use of benzodiazepines to treat short-term ‘mild’ anxiety is inappropriate. Your doctor would be taking a significant legal risk by prescribing against these guidelines. They are only licensed short term for a crisis in generalised anxiety. If this is the case, you should be getting proper care and support for your mental health and not going on a flight.
* NICE guidelines suggest that medication should not be used for mild and self-limiting mental health disorders. In more significant anxiety related states, benzodiazepines, sedating antihistamines or antipsychotics should not be prescribed. Benzodiazepines are only advised for the short term use for a crisis in generalised anxiety disorder in which case patients are not considered fit to fly. Fear of flying in isolation is not a generalised anxiety disorder.
* Although plane emergencies are a rare occurrence there are concerns about reduced awareness and reaction times for patients taking diazepam which could pose a significant risk of not being able to react in a manner which could save their life in the event of an emergency on board necessitating evacuation.
* The use of such sedative drugs can make you fall asleep, however when you do sleep it is an unnatural non-REM sleep. This means you won’t move around as much as during natural sleep. This can cause you to be at an increased risk of developing a blood clot (deep vein thrombosis – DVT) in the leg or even the lungs. Blood clots are very dangerous and can even prove fatal. This risk is even greater if your flight is greater than 4 hours, the amount of time which has been shown to increase the risk of developing DVT whether in an aeroplane or elsewhere.
* Whilst most people find diazepam sedating, a small number of people have paradoxical agitation and aggression. They can also cause disinhibition and lead you to behave in a way that you would not normally which can pose a risk on the plane. This could impact your safety as well as that of other passengers and could also get you into trouble with the law. A similar effect can be seen with alcohol, which has led to people being removed from flights.
* A study published in 1997 from the Stanford University School of Medicine showed that there is evidence use of benzodiazepines stops the normal adjustment response that would gradually lessen anxiety over time and therefore perpetuates and may increase anxiety in the long term, especially if used repeatedly.
* Diazepam and similar controlled drugs are illegal in a number of countries. They may be confiscated, or you may find yourself in trouble with the police.
* Diazepam stays in your system for quite a while. If your job requires you to submit to random drug testing, you may fail this having taken diazepam.

Having considered all the above, we as a practice have decided that none of the doctors will prescribe diazepam or similar drugs for flight anxiety.

Flight anxiety does not come under the remit of General Medical Services as defined in the GP contract and so we are not obliged to prescribe for this.  Patients who still wish to take benzodiazepines for flight anxiety are advised to consult with a private GP or travel clinic.

We appreciate that a fear of flying is a very real and can be debilitating. We recommend tackling the problem with a Fear of Flying Course, which are provided by several airlines. These courses are far more effective than diazepam, have none of the undesirable effects and the positive effects of the courses continue after you have completed them.

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