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# How to Choose a Benzodiazepine for Alcohol Withdrawal

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## Introduction

There are many benzodiazepines to choose from. Generally they are all effective for alcohol withdrawal, and the key thing is to pick one that you are comfortable with and get familiar with its use. Nonetheless, some benzos have become favorites of addiction specialists, and in this sheet we provide some guidelines for how to decide on benzos for specific patients.

## Patients Without Significant Liver Disease

### **Chlordiazepoxide (Librium)**

- *Advantages:* Long acting; active metabolites, allowing for smoother detox with fewer breakthrough withdrawal symptoms between doses
- *Disadvantages:* More euphoria, so patient may be more likely to request extra doses; not available as injectable

### **Diazepam (Valium)**

- *Advantages:* Long acting; active metabolites, allowing for smoother detox with fewer breakthrough withdrawal symptoms between doses; available as injectable
- *Disadvantages:* More euphoria, so patient may be more likely to request extra doses

### **Clonazepam (Klonopin)**

- *Advantages:* Long acting; active metabolites, allowing for smoother detox with fewer breakthrough withdrawal symptoms between doses; less euphoria than the others
- *Disadvantages:* Not available as injectable

## Patients With Significant Liver Disease

By “significant” liver disease, we mean disease severe enough to interfere with metabolism of medications. This is limited to patients with cirrhosis or symptomatic alcoholic hepatitis. Patients presenting with asymptomatic transaminitis with normal bilirubin and albumin can generally metabolize meds normally and can tolerate long-acting benzodiazepines.

### **Oxazepam (Serax)**

- *Advantages:* Short acting; no active metabolites; won't build up in liver disease
- *Disadvantages:* Breakthrough withdrawal symptoms more prevalent; not available as injectable

### **Lorazepam (Ativan)**

- *Advantages:* Intermediate acting; no active metabolites; oral tablet can be given sublingually or rectally if necessary; available as injectable
- *Disadvantages:* Breakthrough withdrawal symptoms prevalent, though not as prevalent as with oxazepam

### **Phenobarbital**

- *Advantages:* Long acting; less euphoria; safe in liver disease because one-third is excreted unchanged
- *Disadvantages:* Because it is ultra long acting (100-hour half-life), patients can become sedated if given too much too quickly