Barbiturates

Hey Alice,

A kid had some pills and told me they were "bars." What kind of pills are these?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The "bars" you are inquiring about may refer to barbiturates, depressant medications that cause relaxed states and drowsiness. Other street names include "barbs," "barbies," "downers," "blue devils," "sleepers," "yellows," and "pink ladies." Health care providers prescribe barbiturates, such as pentobarbital and secobarbital, to treat insomnia, tension, anxiety, and seizures. Barbiturates are also used pre- and post-surgery as sedatives. They are highly addictive drugs, and because they are often misused, most health care providers tend to use benzodiazepines with less risk of overdose. They usually come in pill or capsule form and are often described by the color (red, yellow, blue, or red/blue).

Usually taken by mouth, barbiturates work as Central Nervous System (CNS) depressants, meaning they slow normal brain function, producing a state of intoxication similar to alcohol intoxication. Specifically, barbiturates affect the neurotransmitter gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), which decreases CNS activity. Neurotransmitters are brain chemicals in charge of communication between brain cells. Barbiturates produce drowsiness by increasing GABA traffic ? the more GABA in one's brain, the more tired s/he feels.

Barbiturates are classified according to how fast they produce an effect and how long that effect lasts: ultrashort, short term, intermediate, and long acting. Barbiturates that are used short term take effect almost immediately, and are often used during surgery. Intermediate barbiturates take about 15 - 40 minutes to take effect, and last up to six hours. These pills are used for sleep disorders, and are a common choice for "barb" abusers. Long-acting barbiturates, used for calming anxiety and reducing seizures, last up to 12 hours.

A person's symptoms depend on dosage and tolerance. Lower doses can produce slurred speech and mild impairment of thought and coordination. As the dosage increases, symptoms include incoherent babbling, mood swings, and increased hostility. Depending upon the dose, frequency, and duration of use, a person can rapidly develop tolerance, which may lead to a physical and psychological dependence on barbiturates. For example, "barbs" may be used to treat insomnia. However, if they are used every day, after just a few weeks they are usually no longer effective. With greater tolerance, a person will have to take higher doses to achieve the
desired effects. This is when it becomes risky, because the difference between an effective
dose and a lethal dose is slim. Too much and someone can end up in a coma, or even dead.
Marilyn Monroe died from barbiturate overdose.

If too much of a barbiturate is used, or if it's used too regularly, it can easily become an
addictive behavior. Addiction to barbiturates can cause depression, paranoia, hostility, and
memory impairment. That's why it's important to be under the close supervision of a health
care provider when taking these medications. Withdrawal from barbiturate addiction can be
very uncomfortable for the user and even life-threatening. When a person's body develops a
dependency, his/her brain specifically adapts to function with the addition of the drug. When
s/he stops using, her/his body becomes nervous, tense, and anxious. So if someone decides
to stop using, s/he needs to speak with a health care or addictions professional.

Barbiturates are one of several commonly abused prescription drugs. They were particularly
popular in the first half of the 20th century, but according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement
Administration, less than 10 percent of all depressant prescriptions (not including illegal
purchases of prescription drugs on the Internet) in the United States today are for
barbiturates. Under the supervision of a health care provider, barbiturates can be effective in
treating sleep disorders and other conditions. That's the key ? supervised use!

For more information about barbiturates and other drugs, check these web sites:

   National Institute on Drug Abuse [2]
   U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration [3]

You can also take a look at Special K and X [4] in the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol and Other Drugs [5]
archive to learn more about other sedatives.

Alice!
Category:
Alcohol & Other Drugs [6]
Prescription & Over-the-Counter-Drugs [7]

Related questions

Reaching out for help with a drug addiction [8]
I'm worried about my friend's escalating drug use [9]
Mixing uppers with downers ? Bad idea? [10]
Snorting Adderall and Ritalin [11]
Painkiller abuse [12]

Published date:
Dec 19, 2003
Last reviewed on:
May 07, 2015
Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/barbiturates#comment-0

Links