Dear Alice,

I originally took a muscle relaxer because I was experiencing very bad back pain and could not sleep. I was not prescribed the muscle relaxers. My friend suggested I take one of hers. So I did, and now I will take one sometimes before bed if I can't fall asleep or if I want to actually just relax. It makes me just want to sleep, and I feel really calm after taking one. Is this bad that I take them for this reason? What are the side effects? Is it harmful?

Sincerely,
Miss Dazed and Confused

Answer

Because your question touches on a few topics, it's a good idea to tease apart the distinct (but related) parts. You ask whether it's okay to take medication to relieve pain and to aid in getting to sleep when needed; there are approved medications available for each of these issues. However, taking drugs that aren't prescribed specifically for you can pose risks to your health (more on that in a bit). You also ask about taking medication for the purpose of relaxing or getting to sleep. While using this medication might help you do these things, there are a number of alternative ways to help feel relaxed without taking a pill. To minimize any potential risks to your health, speaking with a health care provider, who's familiar with your personal health history, may provide a tailored treatment plan to effectively and safely treat your ailments.

When a health care provider prescribes a medication, they will check your medical history and current medications to see if there could be any potentially hazardous drug interactions. For example, some drugs can increase blood pressure in individuals; an indicator that the drug may or may not be an appropriate one for you to take, based on your unique health history. Relatedly, there are some health risks to consider when stopping some medications (e.g., increased risks of seizures). These (and other) factors are why it's so important to be under a health care providers supervision when taking prescription medications.

Taking a prescription drug that is prescribed for someone else? even if the two of you share
the same condition? and/or taking a prescription drug for a purpose other than indicated is referred to as drug misuse. Though different from drug abuse, this behavior can also include taking a drug at a different dosage than prescribed (e.g., taking two pills at a time instead of one, as prescribed), or in a different method (e.g., grinding up and snorting a drug that was prescribed to be taken orally). It may also be good for you to know that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) takes drug misuse seriously (it's illegal). As such, health care providers are encouraged to educate patients not to share their drug prescriptions with friends and family.

Another issue to consider is that all drugs carry potential risk to the user's health—prescription or not. In the case of muscle relaxants, they are known to be especially addictive. That's one of the reasons why they are so regulated: drugs like these—even effective ones that are prescribed frequently—require a health professional's oversight to help prevent addiction. Even if you are prescribed a muscle relaxant, it could be worth asking your health care provider about alternative methods of pain relief that pose less of a dependency risk. Other side effects of muscle relaxants are weakness, fatigue, dizziness, or dry mouth. Driving a vehicle or operating large, heavy machinery can be unsafe while using this medication.

Additionally, using muscle relaxers in conjunction with other drugs or medications that are also central nervous system depressants (including antihistamines, sedatives, tranquilizers, cold medicines, alcohol, and narcotics) may compound the effects of the drug. If you're still experiencing back pain, consider making an appointment with your health care provider to discuss this and see what could be done to help.

Lastly, you mention that one of the benefits of taking the muscle relaxant was feeling calm and sleepy. There are many different ways you could consider to relax before bed—without meds. Try making your favorite warm beverage such as herbal tea or hot cocoa with extra marshmallows, snuggling under a fuzzy blanket with your most comfy pajamas, and listening to soothing music. If you're well enough to be active and your back isn't in jeopardy, consider trying a workout class or a long, brisk walk to tire you out before bed. Another option might be yoga; it could be just the ticket to center and calm your mind, and help bring you toward a place of inner serenity. As listed in Health benefits of yoga, regular practice could even have a huge benefit to your back! If you really want to treat yourself, buying yourself a gift like a massage or getting acupuncture are also great ways to help reduce tension and get you to that calm, blissed out place. For some other tips on relaxing and falling asleep, check out Stress, anxiety, and learning to cope and Fall asleep faster.

Here's to helping you find relief safely and get to sleep soundly!

Alice!

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Alcohol & Other Drugs
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