

Z-Hypnotic Sleep Medicines

(Zolpidem, Eszopiclone, Zaleplon)

Sedatives are medications that make you drowsy. Some sedatives cause problems with sleep, such as dependence, tolerance or impaired quality of sleep. Hypnotics are medications that improve sleep quality more directly, and among the most common are zolpidem (Ambien), eszopiclone (Lunesta) and zaleplon (Sonata). Hypnotics are a major advance over sedatives because they do not cause physical dependence or impair sleep quality.

The three hypnotics are very similar, with the main difference that zaleplon lasts 3-4 hours while zolpidem and eszopiclone last up to 8 hours. Zolpidem also comes in a small dose (Intermezzo: 1.75-3.5mg) that dissolves under the tongue and can be taken if you wake up in the middle of the night (as long as you have 4 hours left to sleep in bed).

These medicines should be taken on an empty stomach (=no food within half an hour of taking them) because food slows down their onset by several hours. Get in bed right after taking them, as you won't be in your best frame of mind once they start to take effect (usually within 10-30minutes). There are reports of people doing risky things after taking sedatives, especially if they are revved up or not in bed after taking them. Hypnotics can also worsen sleep-walking.

Paying for the medication

Many insurers do not pay for 30 days of hypnotics, though it is our opinion that people with mood disorders usually have chronic problems with sleep that require nightly use (and research has found no dependency with nightly use).

If your insurer does not cover enough hypnotic medications, contact our receptionist through auth@moodtreatmentcenter.com. Provide us 5-7 days to get it approved. If we cannot get it approved, you can pay for them out of

pocket at Costco for a low price (\$6-15 for 30 pills); you do not need to be a member to use their pharmacy and can call it in for you.

Common Side Effects

Common side effects are memory disturbance, drowsiness, and sedation.

Although these medications are unlikely to leave you drowsy in the morning, research has found they can impair memory and driving skills in the morning, and people who have this impairment

usually aren't aware of the problem. This problem can be reduced by lowering the dose or taking a shorter-acting version, such as zaleplon (Sonata) or Intermezzo.

Rarely, people do notice impaired concentration and memory, a feeling of dissociation ("spacey"), or impaired coordination the next morning.

Be careful when driving or performing other tasks requiring alertness while taking this medication. There are serious consequences for driving while impaired by a sleep medicine, and the law views this the same way they view drunk driving. Seniors may be more adversely affected, because it may affect their coordination and reflexes and lead to falls and injury. Taking them with other sedatives such as alcohol, narcotics, and barbiturates may compound these effects.

Prolonged use of these sleep medications may rarely lead to dependence. Their abuse potential is very low, and they are the sedative-hypnotic agents of choice for individuals with a history of alcohol or drug abuse. These medications have been studied for up to one year of steady use without any evidence of physical dependence. Abrupt withdrawal of the medication can

Key Points

1. Do not eat within 30 min of taking a sleep medicine – that will delay its effects. Get in bed right after taking them.
2. **If insurance does not cover them**, there are low-cost options at Costco or through www.goodrx.com.

possibly cause headache, vomiting, impaired concentration, confusion, tremor, and muscle cramps.

In healthy adults, these medications have very little effect on respiratory function, but in patients with compromised respiratory function (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and emphysema), they may depress their ability to breathe.

How to store and dispose of medication

- Keep out of the reach of children.
- Store away from heat, direct light and damp places.
- To safely dispose of unwanted pills: Do not pour in the toilet or sink (it will enter the water supply). To prevent children or pets from eating it, mix unwanted pills in a bag with a little water and inedible trash (such as coffee grounds or kitty litter) and throw in the trash.

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 6/23/2025

Quick facts

Generic (brand)	Sizes	FDA Approval, Typical doses	Duration
Zolpidem (Ambien) <i>Released 12/16/1992</i>	> Tab: 5, 10mg > CR/ER: 6.25, 12.5mg > Edluar sublingual: 5, 10mg > Intermezzo sublingual: 1.75, 3.5mg > Liquid: 5 mg/act	Insomnia (see left for doses; note women should take the lower dose because they metabolize it differently)	> Regular release: Peaks in 1.5 hour (1.5-2 hours if taken with food). Lasts 4-6 hr > CR or ER: Peaks in 1.5 hour (2-4 hours if taken with food). Lasts 6-8 hours > Sublingual: Peak in 30-80 minutes. Lasts 3-4 hours.
Zaleplon (Sonata) <i>Released 12/16/1992</i>	> Caps: 5, 10mg	Insomnia	Peaks in 1 hour (2 hours if taken with food) Lasts 3-4 hours
Eszopiclone (Lunesta) <i>Released 12/15/2004</i>	> Tabs: 1, 2, 3mg	Insomnia	Peaks in 1 hour (2 hours if taken with food) Lasts 6-8 hours