

# Sleeping Pills Linked To Death And Cancer Risk

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According to a study published in the online journal *BMJ Open*, some well-known sleeping medications have an elevated risk of death, even when taken only 18 times a year, and an increased risk of death when taken in large numbers.

To determine their findings, the researchers analyzed survival rates of 10,500 volunteers who were taking sleeping pills for an average of 2.5 years during 2002-2007. The average age of the patients was 54, and they all had some kind of previous health issue. The following medicines were taken by the patients:

- benzodiazepines (Restoril-temazepam)
- non-benzodiazepines (Ambien –zolpidem; Lunesta-eszopiclone; Sonata-zaleplon)
- barbiturates (butalbital)
- sedative antihistamines (Benadryl, Tylenol PM, Advil PM, Sominex, Nytol- diphenhydramine; Vistaril- hydroxyzine)

The survival rates of the patients were compared to 23,500 patients who lived the same type of lifestyles, were the same age, same sex, and also had some type of health issues, but had been taking the sleeping pills during a different time frame.

The researchers determined, after considering how lifestyle, ethnic backgrounds, age, weight, sex, and prior cancer may affect the patients, that those taking these sleeping pills had an increased chance of dying.

The patients who took up to 18 doses a year of sleeping pills had a 3.5 times higher chance of dying than those who did not take any, and the ones who took between 18 and 132 doses had a 4 times greater chance of dying than those who did not take any sleeping pills. The patients who were taking more than 132 doses per year had 5 times greater risk of dying than people who did not take any.

The researchers say the increased risk of death, mostly between patients age 18 to 55, is directly related to the number doses being taken. The authors note that there were distinct differences between the people who died in the groups, even though the numbers were not very large.

Among the 4,336 patients taking zolpidem (brand name = Ambien), there were 265 deaths. On the other hand, among the 23,671 who did not take sleeping pills or sedatives, there were 295 deaths. The volunteers who were taking the greatest doses of sleeping pills had a 35% higher chance of being diagnosed with cancer. The researchers said this was not related to bad health before the study.

Dr. Trish Goves, editor in chief at *BMJ Open* concludes:

*"Although the authors have not been able to prove that sleeping pills cause premature death, their analyses have ruled out a wide range of other possible causative factors. So these findings raise important concerns and questions about the safety of sedatives and sleeping pills."*

According to the study, between 5-10% of adults took a sleeping pill in the U.S. in 2010.