

THE TABLET: PALLIATIVE CARE PHARMACY TIPS



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Palliative Care Pharmacy Team:

Clinical Pharmacy Specialist:

**Maria Felton Lowry,
PharmD, BCPS, BCGP**
Assistant Professor
University of Pittsburgh
School of Pharmacy,
Department of Pharmacy
and Therapeutics
Palliative Care Clinical
Pharmacy Specialist
UPMC Palliative and
Supportive Institute

Cell: 412-627-8473
Office: 412-864-2899
Email: lowrymf@upmc.edu

If you have a topic you
would like the pharmacy
team to answer, please
send your suggestions to:
lowrymf@upmc.edu

TODAY'S TOPIC:

Is there an un-tapped medication class for appetite stimulation?

Question #1: Can you use lorazepam or other benzodiazepines for appetite stimulation?

Background:

In hospice and palliative care, medications are often used off-label to optimize symptom management. We have limited evidence across different life-limiting illnesses (HIV, cancer, CHF) for use of appetite-stimulating agents. Most evidence is for their use independently in cancer-related or HIV-related cachexia.

Importance:

Benzodiazepines are often utilized for many palliative care symptoms (including anxiety and anticipatory nausea). Other agents used for appetite stimulation (cannabinoids, stimulants, antidepressants, steroids, antipsychotics) are typically used to improve an associated symptom or syndrome contributing lack of appetite for our patients.

The Literature:

Limited literature for use of benzodiazepines with appetite stimulation overall in humans; small study done in the early 90's detailed below:

[Can J Psychiatry. 1993 Feb;38\(1\):19-22](#)

Changes in appetite and weight during the pharmacological treatment of patients with panic disorder

- Methods: 44 patients with panic disorder (ages 19-52) randomly assigned imipramine (mean dose week 4: 104.2 ± 64.7 , mean dose week 8: 133.9 ± 66.2 mg) **diazepam** (mean dose week 4: 17.8 ± 8.6 mg, mean dose week 8: 22.9 ± 10.9 mg) and placebo. The investigators monitored weight and the patients rated their appetite and cravings (via Pittsburgh Appetite Test- PAT) during the 8-week study
- Results: No significant difference in weight or appetite on the PAT among the 3 groups across the 8-week time period
- Conclusion: Very small sample size may have limited clinically significant findings; no change in weight or appetite was observed

[Studies](#) in rat and other mammals have been done showing that benzodiazepine receptors enhance palatability. Benzodiazepines are used in veterinary medicine for appetite stimulation.

[Berridge et al](#) postulates that the "threshold" to produce the palatability effects described would require much higher doses, therefore causing sedation before appetite stimulation could be studied.

A development of a "partial" agonist or "selective" benzodiazepine could better target palatability effects without inducing sedative or anxiolytic effects...

CLINICAL PEARL:

Clinical data does not exist to support the use of benzodiazepines for appetite stimulation, and it is likely that the dose required would cause sedation before improving appetite. Risk likely outweighs benefit for this indication.