

## Reminder: Standard of Practice for Prescribing Benzodiazepines & Z-Drugs

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Manitoba (CPSM) [Standard of Practice for Prescribing Benzodiazepines and Z-Drugs](#) came into effect on November 1, 2020. Prescribers and pharmacy staff must be familiar with the Standard in its entirety. CPSM and the College of Pharmacists of Manitoba (CPhM) have received many questions from members and patients regarding its implementation.

### *Indicate Condition for Non-Application of Standard on Prescription*

The new Standard establishes requirements for the safe prescribing of benzodiazepines and/or z-drugs, including zopiclone and other drugs. The Standard does not apply to the use of these drugs in the treatment of cancer, palliative and end-of-life patients, seizure disorders, bipolar/psychotic disorder, and acute alcohol withdrawal. **To prevent delays in these patients receiving their medication, prescribers should note the indication on the prescription so that the pharmacist is aware why the prescription may not meet the requirements outlined in the Standard.**

### *Dispensing Intervals*

As of November 1, 2020, prescriptions for benzodiazepines and/or z-drugs can only be written for a maximum of three months, with dispensing to be authorized for no more than a one-month supply, unless it is for *infrequent use*. **A dispensing interval must be noted on the prescription.**

Please note that the intent of the *infrequent use* exception is to permit patients who use VERY SMALL quantities of benzodiazepines or z-drugs for flying or other rare occurrences such as having a CT Scan, to fill a SMALL supply of these medications for use over a longer period of time. Simply writing PRN on a prescription for a large quantity of these medications does not constitute *infrequent use* as intended by the Standard.

Pharmacists should use their professional judgement to assess the individual circumstances of the situation as to whether a prescription that has refills remaining should continue to be filled after the three-month period of time. Referring the patient back to the prescriber for follow up may be appropriate if the directions for use or quantities to be filled need adjusting to accurately reflect how the patient is using the medication.

### *Dispensing Intervals for Remote Communities or Travelling*

On an exceptional basis, members may authorize a dispensing interval of up to three months for patients in remote communities and for travel, if the patient has been on a stable long-term prescription. This exception should be noted on the prescription. This limit also applies to those patients who may leave the country for longer than three months at a time (including “snowbirds”) – a maximum of three months supply of benzodiazepines or z-drugs may be prescribed and dispensed at one time. This is identical to the [Standard of Practice for Prescribing Opioids](#).

Patients should be reassessed before a prescription for benzodiazepines and/or z-drugs is refilled. Long-term use of benzodiazepines and/or z-drugs must be supported by current clinical evidence.

Prescribers and pharmacists **must work collaboratively** and are strongly encouraged to proactively review the profiles of those patients who have an active benzodiazepine and/or z-drug prescription on file and to contact the appropriate member of the healthcare team when a revised care plan needs to be established. This includes instructions regarding a dispensing interval that meets the Standard. This also needs to be communicated and discussed with the patient.

### *Physicians to Explain Dispensing, Tapers, Changes*

CPSM is asking its members to NOT simply instruct their patients to ask the pharmacy to fax a request for refills for benzodiazepines or z-drugs. Nor should CPSM members expect pharmacists to carry the sole burden of initiating communication around existing benzodiazepine and z-drug prescriptions that need adjusting to meet the Standard. A proactively arranged virtual or in-person conversation between the prescriber and the patient is the best way to explain the new Standard to existing patients, discuss tapers as appropriate, and alter or replace existing prescriptions, including dispensing intervals, to meet the new Standard.

### *Existing Prescriptions to be Dispensed under New Standard*

Any prescriptions, even if written before November 1, 2020, must comply with the Standard. If a prescription on file is written to be dispensed for more than a one-month supply, only a one-month supply can be dispensed, and a one-month interval noted. At the pharmacy, patients should be notified that they will need to follow up with their prescribers to get new prescriptions that meet the Standard, or the pharmacist can contact the prescriber on their behalf, when appropriate. A prescriber or delegate at the clinic must be available to respond to both patient and pharmacy inquiries.

### *Benzodiazepines and Opioids*

Only in exceptional circumstances can multiple benzodiazepines and/or z-drugs, or opioids and benzodiazepines/z-drugs be prescribed together. A past patient history of receiving medication prescribed in this way is not an exceptional circumstance. Again, prescribers should note the exceptional circumstances on the prescription to prevent delays in the patient receiving their medication.

### *Resources to Assist*

CPSM and CPhM thank members for their diligence and dedication to the safety of patients in Manitoba, especially during times of additional stresses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Pharmacies are encouraged to offer delivery of medications to patients when appropriate, especially for those patients who may be the most compromised. Please see the [Guidance for Pharmacy Professionals: Delivery of Medications During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) for more information.

There are a number of resources in the [Contextual Information and Resources](#) at the end of the Standard that should be reviewed including this toolkit [Managing Benzodiazepine Use in Older Adults](#) by the Centre for Effective Practice in Ontario.