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If you have anxiety, or insomnia, which means you have trouble sleeping, you may be prescribed Ativan. You may also be familiar with its generic name, Lorazepam. Ativan is a high alert medication, which means if you do not take it exactly as prescribed, it may cause illness or injury.

To understand how Ativan works, let's look at what causes anxiety and insomnia.

Your brain is constantly firing information and messages to the rest of your body, telling you what to think, what to feel and what to do.

When you are faced with a situation that makes you anxious, your brain puts you in a state of alert and gets you ready to face the situation. When it passes, the nerve signals in your brain slow down and your body calms. But when you suffer from anxiety, or insomnia, your brain can't turn off that state of alert, making it difficult to calm down or to fall asleep.

Ativan enhances a chemical in the brain called GABA, which helps calm down the signals that are firing in your brain so you can relax and fall asleep.

Ativan comes in a tablet or liquid. Your healthcare provider will decide how much you need to take and how best to take it, but tablets come in 0.5 milligrams, 1 milligram and 2 milligram dosages.

Ativan is a powerful medication. Some people should not take it. Do not take Ativan if you are allergic to the ingredients in it or if you are allergic to other anti-anxiety medications like Xanax or Valium.

Do not take Ativan if you are pregnant. This medication can harm your baby.

If you are breastfeeding, tell your healthcare provider before using Ativan. A different medication may be safer for you and your baby.

Before taking Ativan, tell your healthcare provider if you have a history of: liver or kidney disease, asthma or other breathing problems, glaucoma, or depression.

Ativan can be highly addictive. If you have a history of abuse of: street drugs, prescription medications or alcohol, tell your healthcare provider. There may be a different medication available for you.

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Before taking Ativan, give your healthcare provider a complete list of all other medications you use, including vitamins and herbal supplements.

Some side effects of Ativan include: drowsiness, trouble remembering things, muscle weakness, blurred vision, change in appetite, and headache. If you do notice any of these side effects contact your healthcare provider about how to manage them.

Be aware that you are at an increased risk of falling while taking Ativan. Get up from a sitting or lying position slowly.

Do not drive or operate heavy machinery, including your car, until you know how Ativan affects you.

Do not drink alcohol while taking Ativan. Drinking alcohol while taking Ativan can cause serious side effects leading to death.

If you have an allergic reaction like: trouble breathing, hives, or swelling of your face or throat; call 911. If you have: hallucinations, confusion, thoughts of hurting yourself or others or if you feel like you are going to pass out; call your healthcare provider right away.

This is not the complete list of side effects. Make sure you discuss all possible side effects with your healthcare provider.

Take Ativan exactly as prescribed. Do not change your dose or take it for longer than prescribed.

If you have been prescribed liquid Ativan, only use the dropper supplied to measure your dose.

You may take your Ativan as needed, or you may need to take it several times throughout the day depending on your prescription. Try setting an alert on your phone or watch so you don't forget.

If you are on a dosing schedule and miss a dose, take your Ativan as soon as possible. If it is almost time for your next dose, skip your missed dose and return to your normal medication schedule. Do not double dose. If you think you have taken too much Ativan, call 911. An overdose can lead to death.

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Store Ativan tablets away from moisture and direct sunlight. Your bathroom medicine cabinet is not the best place because of moisture. Liquid Ativan should be kept in your refrigerator. Always store your medication out of sight and out of reach of children to prevent accidents.

When you are done taking Ativan tablets, crush all of your remaining pills and mix them with undesirable trash like kitty litter or coffee grounds. Dispose of liquid Ativan by flushing it down a drain or toilet.

Do not sell or give your Ativan to anyone else. It is against the law and can seriously harm anyone else taking it. Contact your local police station for more information on proper disposal directions.

Ativan can help relieve your anxiety and help you get the sleep you need. But it is a powerful medication that should only be taken exactly as prescribed. If you have any questions about Ativan, ask your healthcare provider and pharmacist for more information.