



University Hospitals Bristol
NHS Foundation Trust

Patient information service
Bristol Royal Infirmary

Alcohol and medication



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Disclaimer:

This leaflet aims to inform you of the risks of using different types of medication with alcohol, and is only meant for general advice.

It does not replace any professional advice. It is important you consult your GP if you have any further questions about your alcohol use and any medications you may be taking.

The risks of mixing medication with alcohol

When you drink alcohol, it can affect the way your body works.

As a general rule, alcohol should not be used in combination with any other medication, whether it's prescribed, bought at the chemist or obtained by any other means.

Drinking alcohol whilst taking medications can change the effects of the medication, the alcohol or both. This is known as interaction.

The interaction between many medications and alcohol can significantly increase your risk of illness and injury. It could even be fatal. Different medications have different interactions with alcohol. Having one drink, a drinking binge or drinking regularly may cause different effects, even with the same medication.

If you have had too much to drink, you may forget to take your medication or, more dangerously, forget you have taken it and as a result take too much.

Effects of taking alcohol and medication

Alcohol has its own effects on health, and used in combination with any medications could exaggerate the possible side effects of the medications.

Some medicines change the way that alcohol is processed in your body and you may feel the effects of alcohol more quickly and intensely. Drinking alcohol can also mean that some medicines just don't work, or they don't work as well as they should.

There is no set formula for what will happen when a person takes medication with alcohol. Each person is different, and the results depend on the type and quantity of medication and alcohol taken, the time frame involved, and also other unique and unpredictable factors.

Types of medications and side effects

Antibiotics:

Antibiotics are used to treat infections in your body. If taken with alcohol, some antibiotics can cause nausea, sickness, and possible convulsions. Always check with your GP or pharmacist before using alcohol with antibiotics. Read the label and instructions on your prescription carefully.

Anti-depressants:

Many people with alcohol problems can feel depressed and may be prescribed anti-depressants. Alcohol can reduce the benefits of anti-depressant medications. Anti-depressants taken with alcohol can cause dizziness and drowsiness. Many people find that if they significantly reduce their alcohol intake, or stop using alcohol altogether, their mood improves.

Anticoagulants:

Anticoagulants are prescribed to prevent your blood from clotting and 'thin' the blood. Warfarin is an example of an anticoagulant. Using alcohol while on this type of medication may increase the risk of internal bleeding or reduce the effectiveness of the medication. The complicated mix of effects and the risks involved with poor blood clotting control means that the situation needs close monitoring and full discussion with your doctor.

Anti-psychotic medication:

Alcohol itself affects mood, thinking and behaviour, and the effects of alcohol on someone with a psychotic illness or who is taking this type of medication are difficult to predict.

Cardiovascular (heart) medications:

These medications are prescribed for heart and circulatory problems. Mixing this type of medication with alcohol can cause dizziness or fainting. It can also reduce the overall effectiveness of the medication.

Methadone:

Methadone is a class A drug which is prescribed as a substitute for opiates such as heroin. If you drink alcohol while on methadone, it is likely to cause you to feel very drunk and lose control very quickly. It can cause you to become increasingly sedated. This can leave you extremely vulnerable and at risk of choking if you vomit. If you are currently drinking alcohol or considering using alcohol while taking methadone, please speak to your GP.

Pain relievers:

If taking pain relievers with alcohol, it will increase the sedating effect of both, which can be very dangerous. Aspirin and other over-the-counter pain relief options can sometimes cause bleeding and inflammation to the stomach lining. The use of alcohol with these medications can increase the risk of this happening.

Sedatives and sleeping tablets:

Examples of these include Valium (diazepam) and zopiclone. These are normally prescribed for anxiety or sleeplessness. These medications have a sedative effect and, when mixed with alcohol, can increase the effects of both. The sedation can increase the risk of accidents and falls. It can also lead to confusion and poor memory. Heavy alcohol use leads to poor quality sleep, and cutting back on alcohol often improves sleep and levels of alertness.

Stimulant drugs:

Examples of stimulant drugs are cocaine, ecstasy and amphetamines. Mixing these types of drugs with alcohol may mean you end up drinking more. This is because the drug covers up the effect of alcohol and you don't notice how drunk you are becoming. It is hard for your body to work properly if you are taking one drug to relax and another one to stimulate – it gets confused!

Contacts

ROADS: 0117 440 0540 (Bristol)

DHI: 01454 868 750 (South Gloucestershire)

Addaction: 01934 427 940 (Weston-Super-Mare)

Advocacy service: 0117 980 0376

Alcoholics Anonymous: 0117 926 5926

SMART Recovery: 0117 922 2364

SWAN Project: 0117 989 2521

Hawksprings: 0117 964 2859

NHS Advice: 111

For confidential health advice

Drinkline: 0800 917 8282 (9am to 11pm, Monday to Friday)

For information and support about your own drinking and where to go for support

www.drinkaware.co.uk

www.nhs.uk/drinkcheck

For loved ones, family and friends of someone who has alcohol problems

DHI: 0117 916 6588

Al-Anon: 0800 0086 811

If you have any questions or concerns about your alcohol use and any medications you are taking, it is important that you discuss these with your doctor.

Adapted from:
Tayside Council on Alcohol and Fife Alcohol Support Service

As well as providing clinical care, our Trust has an important role in research. This allows us to discover new and improved ways of treating patients.

While under our care, you may be invited to take part in research. To find out more please visit:
www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/research-innovation

For access to other patient leaflets and information please go to the following address:

www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/information-for-patients/

Hospital switchboard: 0117 923 0000



Minicom: 0117 934 9869



www.uhbristol.nhs.uk



For an interpreter or signer please contact the telephone number on your appointment letter.



For this leaflet in large print or PDF format, please email patientleaflets@uhbristol.nhs.uk.

