

Alcohol and Drug Interactions

KEY POINTS

- Alcohol causes changes in the way that medicines work in your body. You may need more or less medicine to get the same effect, or you may have greater risk of side effects.
 - Keep a list of all the prescription medicines, nonprescription medicines, supplements, natural remedies, and vitamins that you take. Tell all healthcare providers who treat you about all the products you take.
 - Let your healthcare provider and pharmacist know if you drink alcohol and ask if that affects the medicines you take.
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What is a drug interaction?

A drug interaction is a change in the way that a medicine works when you take it with another medicine, or with alcohol, vitamins, natural remedies, or tobacco. If you have an interaction:

- The drug may not work as well as it should.
- The drug's effect may be increased.
- You may have a higher risk of side effects.

Women and older adults are at higher risk for alcohol-drug interactions.

What is the cause?

Alcohol affects the liver and the chemicals in the liver that help some medicines work and that help break-down some medicines. Using alcohol may cause:

- No change in how the medicine works
- Increased or decreased effects of the medicine
- Shortened or lengthened time the medicine works
- Toxic substances to develop as the medicine breaks down

Also, because long term use of lots of alcohol can damage the liver, the effects of alcohol or medicines may increase or decrease over time.

Alcohol can also add to the risk of other health problems such as:

- Bleeding in the esophagus, stomach, and bowel
- Pancreatitis, which is swelling and irritation of the pancreas
- Heart failure

Some medicines may cause these problems also, so using alcohol can raise the risk of these side effects.

If you have used alcohol for a long time and suddenly stop drinking, the dose of the medicines you take may need to be changed to prevent life-threatening side effects.

Here are some examples of medicines that interact with alcohol:

- Allergy medicines. Drinking alcohol while taking these medicines can cause extreme drowsiness.
- Antibiotic medicines. Taking some antibiotic medicines with alcohol can cause a very fast heartbeat, vomiting, and headache.
- Antidepressants. Some of these medicines cause dangerously high blood pressure when taken with alcohol.
- Antipsychotic medicines. Drinking alcohol while taking these medicines can cause extreme sleepiness, slow your breathing, and cause dangerously low blood pressure.
- Antiseizure medicines. Besides dizziness, drowsiness, and trouble thinking, drinking alcohol with these medicines may increase your risk for seizures.
- Blood pressure medicines. Alcohol can make you drowsy, dizzy, or lightheaded. You may have trouble driving, walking, and seeing clearly. Many medicines make these effects of alcohol stronger.
- Cholesterol medicines. Drinking alcohol while taking these medicines increases your risk of liver damage.
- Diabetes medicines. Alcohol affects blood glucose and insulin levels, as well as judgement, which can cause life-threatening problems if you have diabetes.
- Muscle relaxants. Taking these medicines with alcohol can cause confusion, weakness, problems with judgement, and drowsiness.
- Pain medicines. Alcohol can damage your liver. Acetaminophen may also cause liver damage. Drinking alcohol while taking acetaminophen greatly increases your risk. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, naproxen, and aspirin, may cause stomach bleeding and other problems. These risks increase with alcohol use.
- Sleeping pills. Drinking alcohol while taking sleeping pills can cause you to stop breathing.

How can I prevent drug interactions?

- Don't drink alcohol while taking medicines without your healthcare provider's approval.
- Follow the directions that come with your medicine, including information about alcohol and food. Make sure you know how and when to take your medicine. Do not take more or less than you are supposed to take.
- Try to get all of your prescriptions filled at the same place. Your pharmacist can help make sure that all of your medicines are safe to take together. Let the pharmacist know if you drink and ask if that affects the medicines you take.
- Keep a list of all the prescription medicines, nonprescription medicines, supplements, natural remedies, and vitamins that you take. Tell all healthcare providers who treat you about all the products you take.

- Many medicines have side effects. A side effect is a symptom or problem that is caused by the medicine such as nausea or a fast heart rate. Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist what side effects your medicines may cause and what you should do if you have side effects.

If you have any questions, ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist for more information. Be sure to keep all appointments for provider visits or tests.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

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