

Alcohol & Medications



How common are drug-alcohol interactions?

Many medications can interact with alcohol, leading to a greater chance of illness, injury or death. It is estimated that alcohol-medication interactions may be a factor in at least 25 percent of all emergency room admissions.

About 70 percent of older adults drink alcohol at least occasionally, and 10 percent drink daily. Canadian pharmacists fill 335 million prescriptions every year. In addition, at least 2,000 medications are available without a prescription. Although people who are 65 and older make up only 12 percent of the population, they consume 20 to 30 percent of all prescription medications.

These statistics suggest that some mixing of alcohol and medications is inevitable. Unfortunately, alcohol can change the effectiveness of many prescription or over-the-counter medications.

It is very important to know how alcohol and drugs interact – be careful! Speak with your physician or pharmacist. The following is a sample of some interactions with commonly prescribed medication. Drug and alcohol interactions can also happen with over-the-counter drugs or herbal remedies.

How alcohol and drugs interact

Anesthetics: Do you know that heavy drinkers requiring surgery may need a larger amount of anesthetics? Chronic alcohol consumption also increases the risk of liver damage that may be caused by the anesthetic.

Antibiotics: Antibiotics are used to treat infections. In combination with alcohol consumption, some antibiotics may cause nausea, vomiting, headache and possibly convulsions.

Anticoagulants (such as Warfarin, Coumadin and ASA) are prescribed to prevent the formation of blood clots. Binge drinking (more than five drinks in one occasion) increases the effect of these medications which can increase the risk for life-threatening hemorrhages. On the other hand, heavy regular drinking reduces protection from the medication and blood clots become more likely.

Anti-depressants: Alcohol use and depression are often linked, leading to a high chance of alcohol / anti-depressant interactions. Alcohol increases the sedative effect of anti-depressants, impairing mental skills. A chemical called tyramine, found in some beers and wine, also reacts with some anti-depressants to produce a dangerous rise in blood pressure.

Diabetic medications are prescribed to lower blood sugar. Depending on your drinking patterns, the effectiveness of these drugs can be enhanced or decreased and you may not realize it. Alcohol combined with these drugs can also cause headaches and nausea.

Antihistamines. Drugs such as Benadryl are used to treat allergies. In older persons, antihistamines may cause excessive dizziness, sleepiness and drowsiness. Those effects can be increased when combined with alcohol.

Anti-psychotic medications are used to treat psychotic symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations. Having a few drinks may increase the sedative effect of these drugs. This may impair coordination and cause potentially fatal breathing difficulties. Alcohol consumption and anti-psychotic drugs may also result in liver damage.

Anti-seizure medications are prescribed mainly to treat epilepsy. Binge drinking increases the risk of drug-related side effects. Chronic drinking may decrease the effectiveness of the medication to prevent seizures.

Cardiovascular medication. There are a wide variety of medications prescribed to treat the heart and circulatory systems. Alcohol may react with some of these drugs to cause dizziness or fainting when standing up. Chronic alcohol consumption may also decrease the effectiveness of some drugs used to treat high blood pressure.

Narcotic pain relievers. These drugs, such as Codeine, are prescribed for moderate to severe pain. The combination of these drugs and alcohol increases the sedative effect of both substances, increasing the risk of death from overdose. Even a single drink can be harmful.

Non-narcotic pain relievers. Aspirin and similar non-prescription pain relievers are commonly used by older people. Some of these cause stomach bleeding and prevent blood from clotting. Alcohol can make these effects worse. Older people who mix alcohol with aspirin for pain are at risk for stomach bleeding. Aspirin may also increase the effects of alcohol. Alcohol combined with acetaminophen (Tylenol and others) can cause liver damage.

Sedatives and hypnotics (sleeping pills) such as Valium are prescribed to treat anxiety and insomnia. Higher doses mixed with alcohol may cause severe drowsiness, increasing the risk of household and car accidents. This may be especially true in older people who respond more to these drugs. You need to be particularly careful with medication such as Dalmane, because even small quantities of alcohol can impair driving ability, even when alcohol is consumed the morning after. The combination of Ativan and alcohol may result in reduced heart and breathing functions.

For additional information and references on the above, go to corp.aadac.com/alcohol/the_basics_about_alcohol/alcohol_medical_interaction_beyond_abcs.asp on the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission website.

This newsletter was prepared by:



with representatives from:

*Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Muskoka-Parry Sound Health Unit
Bill Coon, Muskoka Medical Centre
Pharmacy*

All references are available upon request. Please feel free to copy and share this newsletter with others.

For more information about RISK, contact the Muskoka-Parry Sound Health Unit at (705) 789-8813, ext. 225.

For help with alcohol, drugs or mental illness issues, please contact Addiction Outreach (listings in local phone book) or the CAMH Information & Support Line at 1-800-463-6273