

Now that you're successfully stabilising on methadone, we want to tell you about the effects and the risks of 'topping-up' with alcohol.

Alcohol and the body

Alcohol is a depressant drug and, just like any other drug, its use can sometimes lead to problems. When we use the word 'depressant' we're talking about the effects alcohol has on the brain (which co-ordinates all the body's functions) like slurred speech, slower reactions, slower breathing and heartbeat, etc.

Some of the long-term (out of sight!) damaging effects of drinking, can be:

The liver

When the liver has to deal with more alcohol than it can handle, it's likely that damage will occur, but this can happen in stages.

Fatty liver: deposits of fat in the liver – full recovery is possible.

Alcoholic hepatitis: inflammation of liver – full recovery is possible.

Cirrhosis: a permanently scarred and damaged liver.

The stomach and oesophagus

(the tube between stomach & throat)

Excessive use of alcohol tends to have a corrosive impact on the linings of these organs causing conditions like:

Gastritis: an inflammation of the stomach cleared up by avoiding alcohol.

Ulcers: may not be caused by alcohol but are certainly irritated by excessive use of alcohol.

Reflux: can cause ulceration, tearing, bleeding around junction of stomach and oesophagus.

The pancreas

This is a large gland behind the stomach which secretes enzymes and releases insulin. Regular binge drinking can cause serious damage to this gland.

Acute pancreatitis: an inflammation of the pancreas. Causes severe pain with symptoms sometimes persisting even when alcohol is avoided.

Chronic pancreatitis: similar to the acute version and sufferers may also develop diabetes. This condition usually follows many years of excessive alcohol use.

The brain and nervous system

Persistent heavy drinking is often linked to a number of forms of brain damage, and the risk is higher if heavy drinking is combined with a poor diet.

Wernicke's encephalopathy: confused with signs of intoxication – is caused by lack of thiamine (vitamin B1) and can be treated by injection of the vitamin, but is often undiagnosed.

Korsakoff's syndrome: can develop from untreated Wernicke's and is characterised by significant memory loss (similar to dementia). Improvement is variable even with avoiding alcohol.

Methadone and the body

Methadone is a **Class A depressant** drug that's legally prescribed as a substitute for opiates such as heroin. It's used to help people who want to come off illegal drugs like heroin when their addiction makes it difficult to give up without some type of chemical support.

When you take methadone, you get the chemicals you need to stop acute withdrawal symptoms. The effects can last up to 24 hours, so most people get prescribed one dose each day.

There are two main types of treatments using methadone:

Maintenance – stabilising people who are still chaotic or those who experience relapse problems when they start to reduce their dosage.

Reduction – gradual decrease of methadone dosage until the person is drug free.

Methadone does NOT damage the body!

In most cases the liver easily breaks down methadone and it passes through the kidneys into the urine. However, for some people whose livers have been damaged by alcohol or blood borne viruses like hepatitis B or C the extra work for the liver of breaking down methadone can cause overdose or liver failure.

Methadone can affect the brain and cause a reduced cough reflex and slower, shallower breathing. Both can add to the risk of overdose, especially if you take too much methadone or mix it with alcohol.

Why do people use alcohol and methadone together?

Sometimes when people are prescribed methadone they also drink alcohol. This can be for many reasons including:

- You might not think your methadone dose is powerful enough.
- Alcohol is a legal drug and so it's easy to get your hands on.
- You're using alcohol to block out the effects of life.
- You're starting to socialise again and enjoy using alcohol.

SPOT THE ODD ONE OUT



Fish & chips



Laurel & Hardy



Alcohol & methadone



Snakes & ladders

(Hint... only one of them causes liver damage)

What's wrong with mixing alcohol and methadone?

Methadone doesn't cause any harm when broken down by the liver... but alcohol does! It's estimated that 1 in 3 drug users have the blood borne virus hepatitis C, which can be transmitted by shared needles and injecting equipment. All hepatitis viruses cause damage to the liver. If your liver is already damaged and you're drinking alcohol, it will irritate your liver even more and could lead to serious liver damage.

When someone who is on methadone drinks, the methadone gives them a 'head start' and they may lose control very quickly.

Anyone who mixes alcohol with drugs (prescribed or illicit) runs the risk of having unpredictable effects.

Choking to death on your own vomit is a real risk for people who mix alcohol and methadone.

What are the main messages?

Sometimes people feel that they're not getting enough from their methadone and they then try to 'top up' the effect by using other drugs or alcohol. If you feel that your methadone is not working for you then speak to your GP, drug worker or pharmacist about it.

If you are currently drinking or considering drinking sociably, we would advise you to talk to your GP about this.

Mixing alcohol and methadone (two depressants) can be difficult to control as it can cause your central nervous system to become depressed, leading to increased sedation and a reduced reflex reaction. This can be fatal - if you're sick while under the influence of alcohol and methadone you'll be less likely to realise what's going on and will run the risk of choking to death on your own vomit.

Don't mix alcohol and methadone!

Where can you get help or information?

Drinkline: 0800 917 8282

Scottish Drugs Forum: 0141 221 1175

Know The Score Helpline: 0800 587 5879

UK Hepatitis C Resource Centre: 0141 353 6969

For details of other agencies around Scotland contact **Alcohol Focus Scotland** on **0141 572 6700**.

Acknowledgements to the other authors of this leaflet: Linda McNally and Maria Kazantzi of North Glasgow Alcohol Support Services, Linda Malcolm of Greater Glasgow NHS Board (Health Promotion Addiction Team).

Details of local contacts:-



Alcohol Focus gratefully acknowledges financial assistance from the Scottish Executive



Alcohol Focus Scotland

166 Buchanan Street

Glasgow G1 2LW

Tel: **0141 572 6700**

Fax: 0141 333 1606

E-mail: enquiries@alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Scottish Charity, Reg. No.: SCO09538

Alcohol and methadone

IF YOU CAN GIVE UP HEROIN YOU DESERVE A MEDAL...



NOT LIVER DAMAGE!

METHADONE AND ALCOHOL DON'T MIX