



FACTSHEET: ALCOHOL & OTHER DRUGS

In this fact sheet consideration will be given to the use of alcohol with other psychoactive drugs.

What can alcohol do for you?

Sometimes adverts suggest alcohol may-

- refresh us all over
- give us energy
- make us charming and sexy
- let us relax and chill out

What can drugs do for you?

Sometimes we are led to believe that they can

- make all the pain go away
- help us to feel brand new
- fill us full of energy
- let us enjoy everything so much more

Drugs and Alcohol

Sometimes it might happen that a person taking drugs, prescribed or illicit, also takes alcohol without being aware of the possible interactions of both substances.

It's also possible for someone to calculate that if alcohol causes me to feel good and relax and a drug such as valium (diazepam) for example can also make me feel relaxed and calm then if I add them together, they could make double the effect – endless enjoyment and chill out – what a perfect situation!

WRONG! – you would be quite wrong. The effects of taking one drug are not doubled when two supposedly similarly reacting substances are taken. The only possible answer when you add Alcohol to A.N. Other Drug is '**unpredictable**'.

The effects of drugs taken together can be very different from when they are taken individually. Put simply 1 + 1 is likely to equal 5 and **not** 2 or to put it another way 1 + 1 = unpredictable and potentially dangerous.

When considering how alcohol and drugs interact it may be useful to know where alcohol and other drugs go when they enter our bodies, what route they follow and how they are processed.

Generally, a drug will travel through the body by way of the bloodstream until it arrives at the part of the body it is intended for and, once at its destination, the drug will begin (hopefully) to produce the expected changes on the organ or tissue. Gradually the effects of the drug begin to lessen as it is broken down and then leaves the body.

Our favourite drug, alcohol, behaves in much the same way. It also travels by way of the bloodstream and affects the organs throughout our body, visiting the brain en route and causing intoxication to a lesser or greater degree.

It is the liver which tends to play the biggest part in breaking down alcohol and most other drugs.

Some Key Facts

- On average it takes the liver one hour to break down one unit of alcohol. If you take drugs (prescribed or non-prescribed), along with a large amount of alcohol, this can slow down the breakdown of the drug from the body. This is because your liver needs to work twice as hard.
- If you are a regular heavy drinker, your liver is used to working harder on your behalf and this may result in any drugs which you are taking (prescribed or non-prescribed) being broken down quicker by your liver. For example if you are taking medication for your physical or mental health, this might reduce the benefit which you would normally get.

Even if you stop drinking, this effect can carry on for some weeks after your last drink.

- The changes which heavy drinking can cause in your liver, can result in some drugs becoming toxic and damaging the liver and other organs. Therefore, if you are a regular heavy drinker, it is best to be up front with your GP, when seeking help with health problems.
- Elderly people should be particularly careful when using alcohol and prescribed drugs as the liver generally becomes less efficient when we get older.

SPECIFIC INTERACTIONS

Minor tranquilisers

Examples of this group include valium (diazepam) and normisum (temazepam). These drugs tend to be prescribed for anxiety and sleeplessness (insomnia). Many of the drugs in this group will have a sedative effect and when mixed with alcohol, are likely to cause extreme drowsiness with an increased risk of accidents. This combination can be very dangerous for everyone, but is particularly dangerous for anyone driving or operating machinery etc., and for elderly people.

Mixing alcohol and tranquillisers is potentially dangerous and is a combination best avoided.

Antibiotics

This group of drugs is used to treat infectious diseases.

If taken with alcohol some antibiotics can cause nausea, vomiting, headache and possible convulsions.

Read the label on your prescription bottle carefully and always check with your GP or pharmacist before drinking if taking an antibiotic.

Antidepressants

Many people with alcohol problems also feel depressed and may be prescribed anti-depressant drugs. There are a number of potential difficulties with this combination:

- alcohol itself is a depressant drug and thus will reduce the potential benefits of the prescribed anti-depressant drug.
- some anti-depressants also have a sedative effect and alcohol will increase this sedative effect. This increases drowsiness and the likelihood of accidents.
- there are also the effects on your liver (described overleaf), when it has to break down alcohol and a drug.

Antihistamines

Antihistamines are drugs which are used to treat allergic symptoms, hay fever and insomnia. Some are available without prescription.

- alcohol may cause a more intense sedation when taken with these drugs.
- these drugs may cause excessive dizziness and drowsiness in older people and when combined with alcohol this effect will be increased.
- again, a potentially risky combination for anyone.

Pain Relievers

- most pain killers when combined with alcohol will increase the sedative effects of both substances. Essentially there is an increased risk of death from overdose in this instance.
- aspirin and a variety of other over the counter remedies are also used for pain relief. Some of these drugs have the ability to cause bleeding and inflammation in the stomach lining. The use of alcohol with these substances can increase the risk of this kind of bleeding.

Anticoagulants

- Warfarin would be prescribed to reduce hinder the blood's ability to clot i.e., to 'thin' the blood.
- having a drink or a few drinks over an evening will increase the risk of internal bleeding.
- regular heavy drinking can have the opposite effect by reducing the effectiveness of warfarin. If you are prescribed warfarin please discuss the implications of taking alcohol with your GP, before doing so.

Stimulant Drugs

Examples of these drugs include cocaine, ecstasy and amphetamine.

People who take stimulants and alcohol together may end up drinking more than they intend. This is because the stimulant drug covers up the depressant effect of the alcohol i.e., you don't notice how drunk you are getting.

- stimulants together with alcohol, can result in the blood pressure going up.

- using alcohol and ecstasy can be risky as this can result in increased dehydration. Remember, although alcohol is a fluid it does dehydrate the body.

Anti-psychotic medications

Anti-psychotic drugs are prescribed to people with mental health problems. Some difficulties:

- having a drink or a couple of drinks over an evening with this kind of medication may result in impaired co-ordination and serious breathing difficulties.
- further side effects are low blood pressure, dizziness, fainting.
- regular heavy drinking along with some anti-psychotic medications can result in liver damage. If you are taking such medications we would strongly advise you to discuss your drinking with your GP or psychiatrist.

Cardiovascular medication

This group of drugs includes many different medications prescribed for heart and circulatory system problems.

- regular heavy drinking along with propranolol (Inderol) used to treat high blood pressure will reduce the drugs effectiveness.
- alcohol use along with many of these drugs will cause dizziness, fainting.

Again, if you are being treated for any heart or blood circulatory problems we would advise you to be as honest as possible about your drinking with your GP.

Nothing is clear cut or easily defined when considering the effects of alcohol used along with other substances.

This factsheet has considered some of the more common outcomes when alcohol and various drugs are used together but much remains uncertain and unpredictable.

If you are considering using alcohol along with other substances (prescribed or non-prescribed) it's best to seek as much information as you can. Talk to your GP, pharmacist or local alcohol & drug agency.

**Alcohol Focus Scotland
166 Buchanan Street
Glasgow, G1 2LW**

Tel: 0141 572 6700

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

Web: www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

This handout is jointly owned by Alcohol Focus Scotland and the authors. Many thanks to Mary Girvan and Archie Fulton.



FACTSHEET: ALCOHOL & OTHER DRUGS

In this fact sheet consideration will be given to the use of alcohol with other psychoactive drugs.

What can alcohol do for you?

Sometimes adverts suggest alcohol may-

- refresh us all over
- give us energy
- make us charming and sexy
- let us relax and chill out

What can drugs do for you?

Sometimes we are led to believe that they can

- make all the pain go away
- help us to feel brand new
- fill us full of energy
- let us enjoy everything so much more

Drugs and Alcohol

Sometimes it might happen that a person taking drugs, prescribed or illicit, also takes alcohol without being aware of the possible interactions of both substances.

It's also possible for someone to calculate that if alcohol causes me to feel good and relax and a drug such as valium (diazepam) for example can also make me feel relaxed and calm then if I add them together, they could make double the effect – endless enjoyment and chill out – what a perfect situation!

WRONG! – you would be quite wrong. The effects of taking one drug are not doubled when two supposedly similarly reacting substances are taken. The only possible answer when you add Alcohol to A.N. Other Drug is '**unpredictable**'.

The effects of drugs taken together can be very different from when they are taken individually. Put simply 1 + 1 is likely to equal 5 and **not** 2 or to put it another way 1 + 1 = unpredictable and potentially dangerous.

When considering how alcohol and drugs interact it may be useful to know where alcohol and other drugs go when they enter our bodies, what route they follow and how they are processed.

Generally, a drug will travel through the body by way of the bloodstream until it arrives at the part of the body it is intended for and, once at its destination, the drug will begin (hopefully) to produce the expected changes on the organ or tissue. Gradually the effects of the drug begin to lessen as it is broken down and then leaves the body.

Our favourite drug, alcohol, behaves in much the same way. It also travels by way of the bloodstream and affects the organs throughout our body, visiting the brain en route and causing intoxication to a lesser or greater degree.

It is the liver which tends to play the biggest part in breaking down alcohol and most other drugs.

Some Key Facts

- On average it takes the liver one hour to break down one unit of alcohol. If you take drugs (prescribed or non-prescribed), along with a large amount of alcohol, this can slow down the breakdown of the drug from the body. This is because your liver needs to work twice as hard.
- If you are a regular heavy drinker, your liver is used to working harder on your behalf and this may result in any drugs which you are taking (prescribed or non-prescribed) being broken down quicker by your liver. For example if you are taking medication for your physical or mental health, this might reduce the benefit which you would normally get.

Even if you stop drinking, this effect can carry on for some weeks after your last drink.

- The changes which heavy drinking can cause in your liver, can result in some drugs becoming toxic and damaging the liver and other organs. Therefore, if you are a regular heavy drinker, it is best to be up front with your GP, when seeking help with health problems.
- Elderly people should be particularly careful when using alcohol and prescribed drugs as the liver generally becomes less efficient when we get older.

SPECIFIC INTERACTIONS

Minor tranquilisers

Examples of this group include valium (diazepam) and normisum (temazepam). These drugs tend to be prescribed for anxiety and sleeplessness (insomnia). Many of the drugs in this group will have a sedative effect and when mixed with alcohol, are likely to cause extreme drowsiness with an increased risk of accidents. This combination can be very dangerous for everyone, but is particularly dangerous for anyone driving or operating machinery etc., and for elderly people.

Mixing alcohol and tranquillisers is potentially dangerous and is a combination best avoided.

Antibiotics

This group of drugs is used to treat infectious diseases.

If taken with alcohol some antibiotics can cause nausea, vomiting, headache and possible convulsions.

Read the label on your prescription bottle carefully and always check with your GP or pharmacist before drinking if taking an antibiotic.

Antidepressants

Many people with alcohol problems also feel depressed and may be prescribed anti-depressant drugs. There are a number of potential difficulties with this combination:

- alcohol itself is a depressant drug and thus will reduce the potential benefits of the prescribed anti-depressant drug.
- some anti-depressants also have a sedative effect and alcohol will increase this sedative effect. This increases drowsiness and the likelihood of accidents.
- there are also the effects on your liver (described overleaf), when it has to break down alcohol and a drug.

Antihistamines

Antihistamines are drugs which are used to treat allergic symptoms, hay fever and insomnia. Some are available without prescription.

- alcohol may cause a more intense sedation when taken with these drugs.
- these drugs may cause excessive dizziness and drowsiness in older people and when combined with alcohol this effect will be increased.
- again, a potentially risky combination for anyone.

Pain Relievers

- most pain killers when combined with alcohol will increase the sedative effects of both substances. Essentially there is an increased risk of death from overdose in this instance.
- aspirin and a variety of other over the counter remedies are also used for pain relief. Some of these drugs have the ability to cause bleeding and inflammation in the stomach lining. The use of alcohol with these substances can increase the risk of this kind of bleeding.

Anticoagulants

- Warfarin would be prescribed to reduce hinder the blood's ability to clot i.e., to 'thin' the blood.
- having a drink or a few drinks over an evening will increase the risk of internal bleeding.
- regular heavy drinking can have the opposite effect by reducing the effectiveness of warfarin. If you are prescribed warfarin please discuss the implications of taking alcohol with your GP, before doing so.

Stimulant Drugs

Examples of these drugs include cocaine, ecstasy and amphetamine.

People who take stimulants and alcohol together may end up drinking more than they intend. This is because the stimulant drug covers up the depressant effect of the alcohol i.e., you don't notice how drunk you are getting.

- stimulants together with alcohol, can result in the blood pressure going up.

- using alcohol and ecstasy can be risky as this can result in increased dehydration. Remember, although alcohol is a fluid it does dehydrate the body.

Anti-psychotic medications

Anti-psychotic drugs are prescribed to people with mental health problems. Some difficulties:

- having a drink or a couple of drinks over an evening with this kind of medication may result in impaired co-ordination and serious breathing difficulties.
- further side effects are low blood pressure, dizziness, fainting.
- regular heavy drinking along with some anti-psychotic medications can result in liver damage. If you are taking such medications we would strongly advise you to discuss your drinking with your GP or psychiatrist.

Cardiovascular medication

This group of drugs includes many different medications prescribed for heart and circulatory system problems.

- regular heavy drinking along with propranolol (Inderol) used to treat high blood pressure will reduce the drugs effectiveness.
- alcohol use along with many of these drugs will cause dizziness, fainting.

Again, if you are being treated for any heart or blood circulatory problems we would advise you to be as honest as possible about your drinking with your GP.

Nothing is clear cut or easily defined when considering the effects of alcohol used along with other substances.

This factsheet has considered some of the more common outcomes when alcohol and various drugs are used together but much remains uncertain and unpredictable.

If you are considering using alcohol along with other substances (prescribed or non-prescribed) it's best to seek as much information as you can. Talk to your GP, pharmacist or local alcohol & drug agency.

**Alcohol Focus Scotland
166 Buchanan Street
Glasgow, G1 2LW**

Tel: 0141 572 6700

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

Web: www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

This handout is jointly owned by Alcohol Focus Scotland and the authors. Many thanks to Mary Girvan and Archie Fulton.