

FACT SHEET:

Alcohol & Medication

This fact sheet aims to help you to use medicines safely, be aware of the effects of alcohol and avoid any risks of mixing medicines with alcohol. Please note that this fact sheet only gives general advice. It's important that you discuss any concerns you may have about using medicines and alcohol with your doctor or pharmacist. You can also contact any of the numbers on this fact sheet.

The risks of mixing alcohol with medication

When you drink alcohol, it can affect the way your body works. As a general rule, alcohol shouldn't be used in combination with any other medication, whether it's prescribed or bought at the chemist. Drinking alcohol whilst taking medications can change the effects of the medication, the alcohol or both. This is known as **interaction**.

Interaction of medication with alcohol

The interaction between many medications and alcohol significantly increase your risk of illness, injury and 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.

Forgetting how much medication you've taken

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 of the medications you are taking, could exaggerate the possible side effects of the medication. 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.

Everyone is different

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

Check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking alcohol with any type of medication, whether it's prescribed or bought over-the-counter.

Misunderstandings about taking medication with alcohol

It may happen that a person taking medication or any kind of drugs also drinks alcohol without being aware of the possible interactions of the substances.

It is also possible for someone to assume that if alcohol causes them to feel good and relax, and a medication also makes them feel the same, the effect could be doubled if they are both taken together. This is not the case. Taking alcohol with medication is unpredictable and potentially very harmful.

Alcohol, medication and the liver

It takes a healthy liver an average of one hour to break down one unit of alcohol. This means that if you drink two pints of ordinary 4% strength beer (5 units) it will be around five hours before it is completely excreted through your urine. A small 175ml glass of 12% alcohol volume wine (2.1 units) will take around two hours.

If you take medication (prescribed or non-prescribed) with a large amount of alcohol, this can slow the breakdown of the medication from the body. This is because your liver needs to work twice as hard. Conversely, if you are a regular heavy drinker, your liver is used to working harder and this may result in your medication being broken down quicker by your liver. If you are taking medication for your physical and mental health, this might reduce the benefit of your medication.

If you have developed serious liver problems, this will interfere with the way your body deals with some kinds of medication. In general, this leads to medications

being cleared more slowly from the body and often the dose will need to be reduced. This is a complex issue so you need to get clear guidance from your doctor or pharmacist.

Types of medication and side effects

Antibiotics

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

Anti-depressants

Many people with alcohol problems feel depressed and may be prescribed with anti-depressants. Alcohol may reduce the benefits of anti-depressant medication. Anti-depressants may cause dizziness and drowsiness and this effect may be increased when mixed with alcohol. In practice many people find that their mood improves when they reduce or stop drinking and the need for anti-depressant medication can be reviewed if the alcohol problem is tackled.

Anticoagulants

Anticoagulants are prescribed to prevent your blood from clotting and 'thin' the blood. Examples are Warfarin and Heparin. Taking alcohol while on this type of medication may increase the risk of internal bleeding or reduce the effectiveness of the medication by increasing the clearance of Warfarin from the body. This complicated mix of effects and the risks involved with poor blood clotting control mean that this situation needs close monitoring and full discussion with your doctor or pharmacist.

Anti-psychotic medications

Alcohol itself affects mood, thinking and behaviour and the effects of alcohol on someone with a psychotic illness or who is taking medication for this are difficult to predict. In general, alcohol will increase the sedative effects of medication, affecting co-ordination, balance and alertness.

Cardiovascular medication

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

Methadone and alcohol

Methadone is a Class A depressant drug that is legally prescribed as a substitute for opiates such as heroin. It's estimated that one in three drug users have hepatitis C, which can 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.

Some people drink alcohol whilst taking methadone because they think their methadone dose is not powerful enough or they are starting to socialise again and enjoy using alcohol. If you mix methadone with alcohol, it is likely to cause you to feel drunk and lose control very quickly. 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 run the risk of choking to death on your own vomit. If you are currently drinking or considering drinking whilst taking methadone, we would advise you to speak to your GP or pharmacist.

Pain relievers

If taking pain relievers with alcohol, this will increase the sedative effect of both, which is very dangerous as it can lead to overdose and be fatal. Aspirin and other over-the-counter pain relief options can 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 and sleeplessness. Medications of this type may also be prescribed over a few days to help with alcohol withdrawal (detox). These medications will 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 and can

lead to confusion and poor memory. Heavy drinking leads to poor quality sleep and cutting back alcohol often improves sleep and levels of alertness.

Stimulant drugs

Examples of stimulant drugs are cocaine, ecstasy and amphetamine. 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 know how drunk you are getting. Other side effects are an increase in blood pressure and dehydration. Remember, although alcohol is a fluid, it dehydrates your body.

Medication used to support alcohol problems Chlordiazepoxide also known as: Librium

Librium is used for its sedating and anxiety-relieving effects, which help to relieve the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. It has a calming effect and results in sleepiness, relaxed muscles and decreased anxiety. This medicine is only suitable for short-term use with the dose being reduced on day-by-day basis. Possible side effects of Librium are drowsiness, impaired concentration and alertness, light-headedness, confusion, shaky movements, unsteady walk, memory loss, unexpected increase in aggression or muscle weakness.

These side effects are usually a sign that the dose is too high. The side effects of this medication are made worse by drinking alcohol. Treatment with this medicine should be stopped gradually, following doctor's instructions. If the medicine is stopped suddenly, there may be withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, confusion, sweating, tremor, loss of appetite, irritability or convulsions.

Disulfiram also known as: Antabuse

Antabuse is used to help people with chronic alcohol problems to stay off alcohol in order to get the best out of their treatment and support. Antabuse makes the body sensitive to alcohol and causes an unpleasant reaction in the body when alcohol is taken. Even a very small amount of alcohol risks a severe reaction when taking Antabuse. It is usually recommended that this medication should be taken after detoxification has been completed. People who are treated with Antabuse should be fully informed of the medication before starting treatment. The symptoms that Antabuse produces when alcohol is taken can include: flushing, nausea, vomiting, sweating, thirst, throbbing in the head and neck, respiratory difficulty, chest pain,

palpitations, hyperventilation, weakness, vertigo, blurred vision and confusion. These symptoms can be very serious and require medical assessment.

Acamprosate also known as: Campral

Acamprosate works by helping the brain recover from some of the effects of long-term alcohol use. This helps people cope better with situations where they used to drink and makes it easier for them to avoid relapse. Acamprosate is best started soon after detoxification. The medication should be continued even if there has been a brief drinking relapse as it can help the process of recovery.

Side effects tend to be mild and do not last. They can include itching, skin rashes, abdominal pain, vomiting, nausea or diarrhoea. The dose is often reduced in people of low weight to reduce side effects.

Thiamine (Vitamin B1) and other vitamins

Thiamine is essential for the healthy functioning of the heart, the nervous system and the digestive system. It is a vitamin found in wheat, rice and potatoes. A shortage of thiamine leads to a range of effects on the body including the heart and the brain and nervous system. This can result in severe memory problems. Heavy drinkers may have a diet low in thiamine and alcohol interferes with the body's take up of thiamine, increasing the risk of thiamine shortage.

There is an increased risk of shortage of other vitamin and minerals in heavy drinkers. Thiamine and other vitamin tablets help prevent this shortage. Vitamin supplements are safe to take and if you have been advised to take these this is usually best continued over a long period. Even if you are taking vitamins, you should aim to have a balanced regular diet.



Taking the next step

For support and further information available in Fife or Tayside please contact:

FASS Alcohol Support Service

Call us in confidence on
01592 206200

Access online help and support
www.fassaction.org.uk

f @FASSFife | t @FASSFife

Tayside Council on Alcohol

Call us in confidence on
01382 456012

Access online help and support
www.alcoholtayside.com

Other National information and support can be accessed through the following organisations:

Alcohol Focus Scotland: www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous: Helpline: 0800 9177 650 | www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

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Drinkline (Advice and support): 0800 731 4314

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