

ALCOHOL AND MEDICATIONS

Alcohol can interact in harmful ways with many prescribed and over-the-counter medications, and with some herbal preparations. These interactions can change the effect of the alcohol and/or the medication. These changes:

- can take place at low levels of drinking (as low as one drink); and
- can vary depending on the medications, and on individual differences in reactions to alcohol and to the medications.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THAT CAN OCCUR:

- some interactions cause drowsiness or dizziness with even one drink, and can be dangerous when driving, operating machinery or when engaged in any physical activity that carries a risk;
- alcohol dampens activity in the brain (by depressing the central nervous system), and it can be particularly dangerous, or even fatal, when used with medications or other drugs that have similar effects; and
- some medications contain alcohol, so they can increase the total amount of alcohol to a riskier level of consumption.

PEOPLE TAKING MEDICATIONS OR OTHER HEALTH PREPARATIONS:

- should carefully read the labels and pamphlets with their medications (including herbal preparations), to check for harmful interactions with alcohol. Some people may need to reduce their drinking or stop drinking alcohol altogether;
- are advised to be very cautious if drinking alcohol while using benzodiazepines, methadone or other central nervous system depressants;
- are at greater risk of increasing the effects of alcohol and/or decreasing the effectiveness of their medication if they are taking a number of medications. These people may need to reduce or stop drinking alcohol; and
- should consult their doctor or a pharmacist to discuss any aspect of their medication, including possible interactions with alcohol.

HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS:

- should be aware of the possibility of interactions with alcohol, both with the medications they prescribe and with other medications people may take; and
- need to take particular care with medications for mental health problems and for blood pressure.

Commonly prescribed classes of medications, such as benzodiazepines, barbiturates, opiates, analgesics, antidepressants, antibiotics, antihistamines, anti-inflammatories and hypoglycaemic agents have known interactions with alcohol.

SOME OF THE MEDICATIONS THAT MAY HAVE HARMFUL INTERACTIONS WITH ALCOHOL	
Type of medication	In combination with alcohol
Antidepressants and other medications prescribed for the management of mental illness and mood disorders	May cause a range of side-effects
Antihistamines	May cause drowsiness
Benzodiazepines	Further depress the central nervous system
Medicines that already contain alcohol	Increase the amount of alcohol consumed
Cough medicines that contain antihistamines, codeine and alcohol	May cause drowsiness, and increase the amount of alcohol consumed
Drugs for high blood pressure or angina	Can cause dizziness
Medications to lessen the risk of blood clotting and stroke	Can affect the control of blood clotting
Arthritis medicines	May cause stomach upsets

IMPORTANT

- If a medicine or drug doesn't appear in that list, it does not mean that it is safe to drink alcohol while taking it. For example, some antibiotics and some medications used for epilepsy and for diabetes, can also have harmful interactions with alcohol.
- People taking medications of any type should read the labels and the enclosed pamphlets carefully to check for possible interactions with alcohol.

Adapted from Australian Department of Health and Ageing, Australian Alcohol Guidelines Fact Sheets
www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au

Other sources: National Alcohol Strategy 2001–2003/04. *Alcohol in Australia: Issues and Strategies*,
Commonwealth, Canberra.

Alcohol and medication can be a harmful combination.

YOUR HEALTH AND ALCOHOL