

Alcohol is a Drug

CONVERSATION STARTER

When a drug like alcohol is used in conjunction with one or more other drugs (e.g., opioids, cannabis, prescription medication), it can cause dangerous interactions that affect the body. For National Collegiate Alcohol Awareness Week, the “Alcohol is a Drug” educational poster illustrates the lethal effects of combining alcohol with other legal or illicit substances. Use the conversation starter to prompt discussion around the toxic and dangerous outcomes that can come from mixing alcohol with other substances along with its potentially fatal consequences.

In this document, questions to ask and points to make verbatim are in **bold**. Notes and instructions for facilitators are in *italics*.

INTRODUCTION

What is a drug interaction?

A drug interaction is when different types of drugs affect the brain and body and how those substances respond to one another.

Why is it important to know about this?

Taking more than one substance at a time can result in harmful, even deadly, drug interactions. Although the exact outcome can be hard to predict, the general trend can be described based on drug classification/type.

TYPES OF DRUG INTERACTIONS

Drug-drug interactions may cause unwanted side effects and can intensify the effects in harmful ways. Below are ways that drug-drug interactions work and how their combined use can affect your health.

Potentiation occurs when two drugs have the same effect on the body.

Instead of $1+1 = 2$, it's a case of $1+1 > 2$. Your body experiences the effects of each drug, along with an additive or increased effect. This means a person could have a relatively low blood alcohol content (BAC), but, if another substance has been taken, they could be showing depressant effects that are 2.5 to 3 times or more pronounced.

Combining alcohol with other depressant-classified drugs can result in breathing slowing (or stopping) and heart rate slowing (or stopping).

Examples of potentiation with two depressants: alcohol + cannabis, Vicodin, Xanax, opioids, ketamine (K), GHB or heroin

Antagonistic effects happen when two drugs have opposite effects on the body.

Because one drug slows the central nervous system and one drug speeds it up, the body is placed in physiological “tug of war,” which can short-circuit the central nervous system and cause cardiac arrest.

If the effects of a substance are masked by an immediate release (IR), a person might continue using one (or both) substances more than they normally would, which could exceed what is normal and lead to a lethal dose.

Stimulants tend to leave the body faster than depressants, meaning that as drugs wear off at different rates, the person could be left with a lethal dose of the depressant (alcohol). Examples of antagonistic effects with stimulants: alcohol + cocaine, Adderall/Ritalin, energy drinks, meth or MDMA (molly/ecstasy)

Combining cocaine and alcohol results in a three-way drug interaction.

The liver manufactures a third drug, called cocaethylene, when these two drugs are taken together, which produces a more pronounced high, objectively, and the risk of death increases.

Using alcohol and over-the-counter pain medications (e.g., aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen) can cause safety concerns for your body and internal organs.

Alcohol increases the threshold for gastric bleeding, and so do these pain relievers. Additional concerns related to the functions of the stomach, kidney and liver have been reported.

Prescription medications (e.g., antibiotics, anti-depressants or any other medications) can affect the body when combined with alcohol.

There could be serious interactions that occur between alcohol and the prescribed drug. Just because prescriptions can be obtained legally does not mean they are safe when combined with each other or with alcohol. Even small combinations can prove to be dangerous and result in damage to internal organs.

Based on your personal health, the interactions may vary. Ask your prescribing provider if you can drink while on the medication. If they say no, that’s important to know for the

following reason: The medication needs a chance to do what it is intended to do, and alcohol can interfere.

CONCLUSION

What should you do to prevent negative drug interactions?

If you make the choice to use alcohol in combination with another drug, it opens up an unpredictable situation from a drug interaction standpoint.

Reading the label every time you use a non-prescription or prescription drug and taking the time to learn about drug interactions are critical to your health.

If you are ever worried about someone's safety in relation to having used more than one substance, call 911 for immediate assistance.

If you have concerns about you or a loved one's substance use, [take an anonymous, confidential substance use screening](#) to learn more about professional support resources and treatment options.

