It's Dangerous to Mix Alcohol and Medicine

In recent years, hundreds of new drugs have been introduced for inducing sleep, for tranquilization and sedation, and for relief of pain, motion sickness, head colds, and allergy symptoms. Too numerous to name, they include narcotics, benzodiazepines, such as Valium, Dalmane, etc., and other hypnotic-sedative drugs, tranquilizers, and antihistamines.

Alcohol is a drug. It can produce feelings of well-being, sedation, intoxication, unconsciousness, and death. Because alcohol and some of these other drugs work on the same areas of the brain, taking them fairly close together (not necessarily simultaneously) can produce a combined effect much greater than is expected. For example, alcohol and benzodiazepines in combination can be particularly dangerous, as they increase each other's effects on the central nervous system. Alcohol in combination with any drug that has a depressant or tranquilizing effect on the central nervous system likewise represents a special hazard to health and safety - sometimes to life itself. The drug adds to the normal depressant effect of alcohol, further depressing the nervous system that regulates vital bodily functions. Death can result.

Some understanding of metabolism, i.e., the way our bodies chemically process the things we eat, drink, or take, is necessary to explain a second kind of interaction. If drugs were not metabolized within the body their effect would continue for the remainder of a person's life. In the metabolic process, drugs are transformed into other substances, which are eventually eliminated through normal bodily function. The more rapidly a given drug is metabolized, the less time it has an effect. When drugs are forced to compete with alcohol for processing by the body, one or both are metabolized more slowly. As a result, the effect of the alcohol and/or the drug is exaggerated because it remains active in the blood for an extended period of time.

There are other dangers that can also lead to serious problems in persons who habitually drink large amounts of alcohol. Liver damage resulting from prolonged drinking can reduce the metabolism of many drugs, causing a normal dose to be unexpectedly potent. On the other hand, benzodiazepines or sedatives will have less effect in heavy drinkers during periods of sobriety, as excessive drinking eventually increases the body's ability to metabolize them. It is therefore not uncommon for heavy drinkers to take even larger doses of these drugs, because the usual quantities taken by nondrinkers or moderate drinkers will have little effect. The results of taking the large dose and then drinking can place these persons in even greater jeopardy and can be fatal.

Think Before You Drink

Of the 100 most frequently prescribed drugs, more than half contain at least one ingredient known to react adversely with alcohol. If you want to take a drink when you are also taking medication, three actions may save you from a serious illness, an accident, or may even save your life:

- Read the warnings on nonprescription drug labels or those on your prescription container.
- Ask your doctor about possible alcohol/drug interaction
- Check with your pharmacist if you have any questions about your medication, especially those you can buy without a doctor's prescription

This fact sheet was developed by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism and is updated regularly by MRC.

What Could Happen if You Drink Alcohol While Taking Medicines

The chart below lists classes of medically used drugs that have been reported to interact with alcohol. Some of the dangers that may result from combining alcohol with the other listed drugs are described. It must be emphasized that this chart, or any other like it, represents only the smallest part of the whole alcohol/drug interaction picture. It is not meant to replace the advice of your family doctor or your pharmacist.

ANALGESICS, NARCOTIC

(Demerol, Codeine, Percodan, etc.)

When used alone, either alcohol or narcotic drugs cause a reduction in the function of the central nervous system. When they are used together, this effect is even greater, and may lead to loss of effective breathing function (respiratory arrest). Death may occur.

ANALGESICS, NONNARCOTIC

(Aspirin, Tylenol, Motrin, etc.)

Even when used alone, some nonprescription pain relievers can cause bleeding in the stomach and intestines. Alcohol also irritates the stomach and can aggravate the bleeding, especially in ulcer patients. Alcohol my also increase susceptibility to liver damage from acetaminophen.

ANTIALCOHOL PREPARATIONS

(Antabuse)

Use of Alcohol with medications prescribed to help alcoholic patients keep from drinking results in nausea, vomiting, headache, high blood pressure, and possible erratic heart beat, and can result in death.

ANTICOAGULANTS

(Coumadin, Panwarfin, Dicumarol, etc.)

Alcohol can increase the ability of these drugs to stop blood clotting, which in turn can lead to life-threatening or fatal hemorrhages.

ANTICONVULSANTS

(Dilantin, etc.)

Drinking may lessen the ability of these drugs to stop convulsions and may exaggerate blood disorder side effects of the anticonvulsant.

ANTIDEPRESSANTS

(Tofranil, Pertofrane, Triavil, BuSpar, Desyrel, etc.)

Alcohol may cause an additional reduction in central nervous system functioning and lessen a person's ability to operate normally. Certain antidepressants in combination with red wines like Chianti may cause high blood pressure crisis.

ANTIDIABETIC AGENTS/HYPOGLYCEMICS

(Insulin, Diabinese, Orinase, etc.)

Because of the possible severe reactions to combining alcohol and insulin or the oral antidiabetic agents, and because alcohol interacts unpredictably with them, patients taking any of these medications should avoid alcohol.

ANTIHISTAMINES

(most cold remedies, Actifed, Coricidin, Benadryl, etc.)

Taking alcohol with this class of drugs increases their calming effect and a person can feel quiet drowsy, making driving and other activities that require alertness more hazardous.

ANTIHYPERTENSIVE AGENTS

(Aldomet, Dyazide, Capoten, Cardizem, etc.)

Alcohol may increase the blood pressure lowering capability of some of these drugs causing dizziness when a person gets up. Some agents will also cause a reduction in the function of the central nervous system.

ANTINECTIVE AGENTS/ANTIBIOTICS

(Flagyl, Chloromycetin, Furoxone, E-Mycin, Cipro, etc.)

In combination with alcohol, some may cause nausea, vomiting, and headache, and possibly convulsions, especially those taken for urinary tract infections. Some are rendered less effective by chronic alcohol use.

CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM STIMULANTS

(most diet pills, Dexedrine, Caffeine, Ritalin, etc.)

Because the stimulant effect of this class of drugs may reverse the depressant effect of the alcohol on the central nervous system, these drugs can give a false sense of security. They do not help intoxicated persons gain control of their movements.

DIURETICS

(Lasix, Bumex, HydroDIURIL, etc.)

Combining alcohol with diuretics may cause reduction in blood pressure, possibly resulting in dizziness when a person stands up.

PSYCHOTROPICS

(Haldul, Mellaril, Thorazine, etc.)

Alcohol with the "major tranquilizers" causes additional depression to central nervous system function, which can result in severe impairment of voluntary movements such as walking or using hands. The combination can also cause a loss of effective breathing function and can be fatal.

SEDATIVE HYPNOTICS

(Dalmane, Restoril, Halcion, Nembutal, etc.)

Alcohol in combination further reduces the function of the central nervous system, sometimes to the point of coma or the loss of effective breathing (respiratory arrest). This combination can be fatal.

SLEEP MEDICINES

(Sominex, Sleep-Eze, Dormin, etc.)

It is likely that nonprescription sleeping medicines, to the degree that they are effective, will lead to the same kind of central nervous system depression when combined with alcohol as the minor tranquilizers (See below).

TRANQUILIZERS/ANTIANXIETY

(Miltown, Valium, Librium, Xanax, Ativan, etc.)

Tranquilizers in combination with alcohol will cause reduced functions of the central nervous system, especially during the first few weeks of drug use. This results in decreased alertness and judgement and can lead to household and automotive accidents.

VITAMINS

Continuous drinking can keep vitamins from entering the blood stream. However, this situation changes when a person stops drinking.

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