

MIXING ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

FACT SHEET



The effects of illegal drugs will always be unpredictable. Generally, if someone mixes them with alcohol, the effects will be exaggerated and can result in anything from nausea to heart failure. The best advice is to completely steer clear of illegal drugs, especially with alcohol.

What happens in the body?

Alcohol is a depressant. Combine it with a stimulant, such as cocaine, and the two drugs compete with each other. The depressant drug tries to slow the brain/central nervous system down, while the stimulant tries to speed it up – putting the brain/central nervous system under great pressure.

Combine alcohol with another depressant drug, heroin for example, and the effect they each have of slowing the central nervous system will be multiplied, and it risks the body shutting down altogether.

With no quality control in the world of illegal drugs, people can never be 100% sure of exactly what's in the substance being taken. It could be cut with other cheaper drugs such as tranquilisers. Add alcohol into the mix and it's a potentially lethal cocktail.

If someone is under the influence of drugs, they're less likely to make wise decisions about how much alcohol they drink. So the risk of alcohol poisoning increases.

Alcohol & psychoactive substances 'NPS'

Previously known as 'legal highs', drugs such as meow meow became illegal in 2016

when they were classified as class B drugs. A powerful stimulant. They're derived from the plant khat and have similar effects to ecstasy and speed. Some NPS can be very dangerous, especially if taken with alcohol or other sedatives. These drugs can over stimulate circulation, damaging the heart, speed up the nervous system and cause fits. They can also make people anxious and paranoid. As with any drug that gives a 'high', if they are combined with alcohol there is an increased risk of everything from nausea and vomiting to coma.

Alcohol and ecstasy (MDMA) liquid ecstasy (also known as GHB, legal E)

It's possible that alcohol will deaden the 'high' from ecstasy while the drugs are in the body. But the next day, a severe hangover is one of the milder side-effects of the combination. As with many other combinations, it's likely to cause nausea and vomiting.

Ecstasy and alcohol are dehydrating so, when combining the two, there is a risk of overheating and becoming dangerously dehydrated. Alcohol is involved in most ecstasy related deaths, many of which are from heatstroke after people have danced for long periods of time in hot clubs without drinking enough water. However, Ecstasy prevents the kidneys from excreting water which can result in a dilutional effect of the blood, low sodium and swelling of brain cells, which can lead to death.

Alcohol and amphetamines and methamphetamine¹⁶ (also known as: Crystal Meth, Ice, Meth, Phet, Whizz, Speed, Yaba, Tine and Christine)

In the short-term, these drugs can make people feel wide awake and alert and make it difficult to relax or get to sleep. They can also be addictive.

The effects of amphetamines, often called 'speed', leads to breathing, blood pressure and the heart rate increasing. Speed can increase body temperature and cause dehydration – which is heightened with alcohol. As speed already puts pressure on the heart, if alcohol is added, that pressure can be fatal.

Under the influence of speed someone may feel more confident or energised, but they can easily become anxious, paranoid or aggressive, particularly when someone puts alcohol in the mix. The full effects of alcohol aren't felt until the speed has worn off. Mixing the two means a person can drink dangerous amounts without realising.

Alcohol and cocaine

Alcohol and cocaine together increase the risk of heart attacks, fits and even sudden death. The two drugs interact to produce a highly toxic substance in the liver called cocaethylene. It can increase the depressive effects of alcohol, making reaction to the cocaine stronger. Using cocaethylene is likely to increase aggression.

Cocaethylene takes longer to leave the body than either alcohol or cocaine, subjecting the heart and liver to a longer period of stress.

Mixing alcohol and cocaine can be fatal up to 12 hours after consumption.

Alcohol and heroin

Alcohol with heroin is one of the most dangerous combinations of drugs. 'Downers' like heroin slow down the heart rate and breathing. When combined with another 'downer' such as alcohol the effect is doubled and putting the person at risk of overdosing. The National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse says that even small amounts of alcohol seem to lower the amount of heroin needed to fatally overdose.

Tranquilisers (also known as: Street Benzos, Blues, Downers, Roofies, Vallies)

Tranquilisers may make the user feel unaware of their surroundings. One example is 'benzodiazepines', or benzos, a depressant. There are many drugs in this group and some, such as diazepam (Valium), are prescribed as medicines in the UK mostly for anxiety or occasionally sleeping problems. Other benzodiazepines are not licensed or generally prescribed in the UK, such as alprazolam (Xanax) and etizolam, but are prescribed in other countries. Doctors only prescribe Benzodiazepines for a short period because they can be highly addictive. In the short-term, these drugs can make people feel calmer, but depending on the type, they can lead to confusion or moodiness.

Illegal 'street benzos' are used for their relaxing effects. A number of benzodiazepine-type new psychoactive substances (NPS) have emerged and many 'street benzos' contain an NPS benzodiazepine, like etizolam, rather than diazepam. 'Street benzos' may be mis-sold as diazepam but they're often referred to vallies, blues and benzos. Street benzos are mixed with harmful substances and their strength varies between pills. Of those tested, just 13% actually matched the seller's description.

It is dangerous to take any type of benzodiazepines with alcohol as both depress the central nervous system, which affects breathing. This means that using any combination of these types of drugs with alcohol increases the risk of overdose and death.

More information

Visit the Life Stuff website for more information on drugs and links to other useful websites life-stuff.org.

For more information on drugs, what they are and their effects, visit: talktofrank.com.

The National drugs helpline offer general advice and information and referral onto local services. Open 24 hours.

Tel: 0800 77 66 00 (freephone)