

WHEN ALCOHOL IS COMBINED WITH OTHER DRUGS, THE EFFECTS CAN BE PARTICULARLY HARMFUL.

Alcohol and Drugs

This fact sheet looks at what can happen when alcohol is combined with tobacco, and/or the various types of illicit drugs, and/or drugs used for non-medical purposes:

- Because alcohol dampens activity in the brain, it can be particularly risky – and even fatal – if it is taken with other drugs that have the same effect, such as heroin and benzodiazepines. Drug overdoses, suicide and self-harm can result.
- The combination of alcohol and drugs (including cannabis) can also make it difficult to drive or carry out other activities with safety.
- Some illnesses may be made worse by the combined effect of alcohol and another drug: in association with illicit drugs, this includes severe liver disease; and in association with smoking, the risk level is markedly increased in some cancers.
- Misuse of alcohol is often accompanied by misuse of other drugs.

People who take drugs are advised to be very cautious if drinking alcohol while using benzodiazepines, heroin, methadone or other central nervous system depressants:

- This is because alcohol dampens activity in the brain, and so it can be particularly dangerous, or even lethal, when used with drugs, legal or illegal, that have similar effects (that is, of depressing the central nervous system).
- The two substances of particular concern in this category are heroin and benzodiazepines. People using heroin are at particular risk if they drink, especially if they engage in heavy bouts of drinking. A high proportion of people who die from heroin overdose also have a high blood alcohol concentration, and the risk of serious brain damage from overdose is similarly increased. Benzodiazepines in combination with alcohol also pose a significant risk, and the combination of alcohol, heroin and benzodiazepines further increases an already high risk.

Other harmful effects from combining drugs and alcohol:

- **In the short-term:**
 - Suicide and self-harm are linked both to heavy drinking and to illicit drug use, and drinking and drug use together pose a particular risk.
 - The combination of alcohol with other drugs (particularly cannabis) also poses risks for driving and other complex tasks, with the potential to harm others as well as the drinker.
- **In the longer term:**
 - Many people who have used illicit drugs have contracted chronic hepatitis C infection that, in some people, will lead to severe liver disease. Alcohol dramatically increases both the risk and the progression of severe liver disease in these people. The risk increases with the level of drinking.
 - The risk of cancers of the lips, mouth, throat, larynx and oesophagus is dramatically increased in heavy drinkers who also smoke.

ALCOHOL AND YOUR HEALTH

National Alcohol Strategy



- Recent studies suggest that alcohol may act as an important risk factor for bowel cancer, when combined with smoking.

Combinations of drugs and alcohol

Research has shown that there is a strong linkage between the misuse of alcohol and the misuse of other drugs. The pattern that tends to be followed by people taking up multiple drugs (or *polydrug use*), is that they start with alcohol, and then take up cannabis/marijuana, followed then by other drugs. A 2001 survey of drug use by people aged 14 years and over in Australia found that, of those described as:

- **'Recent drinkers'**: 26% currently used tobacco, 15% currently used cannabis, about 4% currently used amphetamines (for non-medical purposes), 3% currently used ecstasy, 1% currently used LSD/synthetic hallucinogens, and 0.2% currently used heroin;
- **'Recent cannabis users'**: 97% had recently used alcohol, 57% had recently smoked tobacco, 22% had recently used amphetamines, 20% used ecstasy, and 9% had used LSD/synthetic hallucinogens;
- **'Recent tobacco smokers'**: 91% had recently used alcohol and approximately 32% had recently used cannabis.

There is evidence that people who become dependent on one drug are more likely to become

dependent on another, including alcohol; and frequent abuse of other drugs is often seen in people being treated for alcohol problems, including adolescents:

- This complicates the issue of treatment and results in a higher risk of relapse to alcohol or substitution of another drug for alcohol.
- Adolescents have reported that alcohol removes their inhibitions and alters their judgement, increasing the likelihood of their experimenting with drugs.

Other relevant Fact Sheets:

- *Alcohol and medications*
- *Alcohol and young people*

Principal source

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2001). *Australian Alcohol Guidelines: Health Risks and Benefits*. NHMRC, Canberra.

Other sources

Alcohol in Australia: Issues and Strategies. (2001) Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra.

National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2001 – Unpublished Data Set. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.

