

Mixing

reduce your risk of harm



Medicines • Alcohol • Drugs

What do we mean by mixing?

Mixing means taking two or more drugs at the same time. This can include alcohol, over-the-counter medications, prescription drugs (such as diazepam, tramadol, Lyrica/pregabalin) and illegal or illicit drugs (such as MDMA, cocaine, heroin).

By mixing drugs you increase your chances of having a bad reaction or outcome for a number of reasons.

- Taking similar types of drugs can increase their negative effects and increase risk. For example, taking two depressants like an opioid painkiller and alcohol.
- A drug may affect you in a particular way that makes other drug(s) you take more dangerous than usual. For example, alcohol can increase the side effects of some antidepressants, such as drowsiness, dizziness and coordination problems.
- One drug may mean you have to take higher levels of another type of drug to feel the effects, for example if you take a stimulant and a depressant together. This can lead to overdose.
- The drugs might interact in completely unexpected ways (even if it's the same combination – drugs and dose – you have taken before).

Mixing any combination of prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, illicit drugs and alcohol can be unpredictable and dangerous.

Most fatal overdoses involve use of more than one type of drug. In Northern Ireland, three out of four drug-related deaths involve more than one drug or a combination of one or more drugs and alcohol. In many cases, prescription drugs are involved.



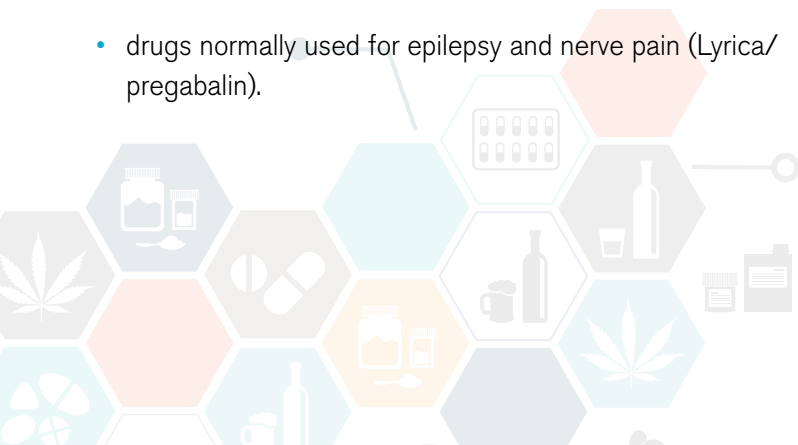
Mixing drugs is dangerous because different drugs act on our bodies in different ways. The harmful effects are magnified by using more than one drug type.

Some drugs are especially risky to mix. This includes:

- cocaine and alcohol;
- opioids (such as tramadol, heroin or morphine) and alcohol;
- opioids and gabapentinoids (such as Lyrica/pregabalin or gabapentin);
- opioids and downers (such as benzos);
- opioids and other opioids.

Prescription drugs which are highly likely to cause serious side effects when taken along with other drugs include:

- painkillers (such as morphine, oxycodone, co-codamol, tramadol);
- antidepressants (fluoxetine/Prozac, amitriptyline);
- tranquilisers and sleepers (diazepam, nitrazepam, temazepam, phenazepam);
- drugs normally used for epilepsy and nerve pain (Lyrica/pregabalin).



Mixing alcohol and other drugs: specific risks



Alcohol and prescription drugs

- If your GP prescribes medicine for a health condition or illness, you should always check whether it's safe to drink alcohol while taking the medicine (read the accompanying Patient Information Leaflet or ask your GP if you're unsure).
- Alcohol can interfere with the effects your medicine is supposed to have on your body. There are also health risks if you take over-the-counter painkillers or illegally obtained prescription drugs with alcohol.



Alcohol and amphetamines

- Amphetamines increase your heart rate, breathing and blood pressure. Taking alcohol and amphetamines together puts pressure on your heart and could cause death.
- Amphetamines can also raise your body temperature and cause dehydration, which is worse if you also drink alcohol.
- As amphetamines can make you feel more sober than you really are, you might drink more to get drunk. You may also feel that you have more energy and confidence but, mixed with alcohol, you can become aggressive and paranoid.



Alcohol and cannabis

- Alcohol and cannabis together can lead to the cannabis having a stronger effect than normal. You can also experience physical and psychological side effects.
- When using alcohol and cannabis together, you may experience nausea, vomiting, dizziness, paranoia and/or panic.

Alcohol and cocaine

- Alcohol and cocaine in the bloodstream form a toxic substance known as 'cocaethylene'. It is more toxic than either drug alone. It is linked to liver damage and can cause fatal heart problems.
- Mixing alcohol and cocaine can make you feel more sober than you really are, so you might drink more to get drunk. By taking both together, you're likely to be aggressive and behave violently.



Alcohol and ecstasy (MDMA)

- Alcohol and ecstasy both dehydrate your body. By taking both together, you risk overheating and becoming very dehydrated.
- The combination of alcohol and ecstasy puts pressure on your liver and kidneys. This could cause these organs to stop working.



Alcohol and heroin

- Heroin slows down your heart rate and breathing. Your risk of overdose increases when you take alcohol with heroin. You might choke if you vomit, as both drugs together impair your gag reflex.



Reducing risks

You can keep health risks to a minimum by following the advice below.

- Only drink alcohol in moderation (no more than 14 units per week for men and women, spread evenly throughout the week).
- Avoid taking illicit drugs altogether.
- Only take medication that has been prescribed by your doctor and as they have instructed.
- Ask your doctor whether you need to avoid alcohol while taking a medication they have prescribed for you.



If you do choose to mix drugs, the advice below may help reduce the risks for you. It is intended to be general advice, and does not relate to any specific drug or type of drug.



- Think carefully about the risks before you start, especially if you have mental health problems, as using any drugs that have not been prescribed for you can put your mental health at greater risk.



- Try to have someone else there if you do plan to take drugs, ideally someone you can trust to look after you if things go wrong.



- Start low and go slow, especially if you are taking a drug you have never used before. Take a small amount at first and let it reach its peak effect to test how strong it is. You can always take more later on – you can never go back and take less.



- Remember that different drugs act at different speeds, and a slow response does not necessarily mean that the drug is weak – it may mean you have taken a slow-acting drug which could in fact be strong. Redosing (taking more) could lead to overdose.



- Bear in mind that drugs that look the same as each other may not be the same. A pill or powder that looks like one you took last week may in fact have entirely different drugs in it (the same is true of prescription drugs obtained illegally). New drugs are being identified at a rate of around one per week. You can never know what you are taking.



- It is important to keep hydrated and you should sip no more than a pint of fluid per hour during the session. Avoid energy drinks because the caffeine in them can increase strain on the heart. Alcohol causes dehydration and increases the risk of dangerous side effects.



- Look after your friends. It's ok to tell each other to take it easy; that's what good friends do. Don't let anyone go off by themselves. If anyone becomes unwell, stay with them. Some people can become aggressive. This can be a sign of someone having taken too much and may be an indicator of overdose.
- Avoid taking other drugs to help you come down as these could prolong the come down or even cause overdose.

Help and information

If you, or someone you are with, experience any worrying symptoms, call 999 immediately and be honest about what you/they have taken. The sooner you present to the Emergency Department, the more likely it is that any treatment will be successful.

If you think you may have a problem with alcohol and/or drugs, your GP can provide help and advice and refer you to other relevant services. You can also visit www.drugsandalcoholni.info for more information on services available in your local area, what support they can provide and how to access them.

The website also provides details of a range of services which can help if you are affected by someone else's drinking and/or drug misuse. These services are available to you regardless of whether or not your loved one is receiving help for his or her alcohol and/or drug problem.

Some people experience suicidal thoughts and feelings after taking drugs, especially after a binge. If you are concerned about yourself or another user, talk to someone like a GP, addiction service or mental health service immediately. Lifeline counsellors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to listen in confidence - call 0808 808 8000.



If you have taken a drug which has had unexpected unpleasant side effects and you think other people should be warned about it, contact the Drug and Alcohol Monitoring and Information System at damis@hscni.net
This information will be treated in confidence and will be used only to warn other drug users.



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