FACT SHEET 5

MEDICINES AND ALCOHOL:
A DANGEROUS MIX

This fact sheet provides an overview of the effects of alcohol when taking medication, and how parents can assist their teenagers to minimise the potential harms...

Did you know?

› By the age of 12 over 90% of students have used analgesics (pain relievers) and 15% have used minor tranquillisers (anti-anxiety and insomnia medication).

› By 14 years of age, 90% of Australian teenagers have tried a full glass of alcohol. By the time these teenagers turn 17 years of age many drink alcohol regularly or occasionally.

› Drinking at a young age carries a range of health and other risks. What many young people don't realise is that it can be dangerous, even life-threatening, to drink alcohol when they are taking medication.

Key facts

How many young people are taking medication?

It's difficult to know exactly how many young people are taking medication at any particular time. However, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2004–05 children are represented across a range of medical conditions:

› Forty-one per cent of children aged under 15 years had a long-term health condition.

› Boys (44%) were more likely than girls (38%) to have a long-term health condition.

› Mental health, behavioural and emotional problems were reported for 7% of children overall.

› One in eight children aged under 15 years (12%) were reported as having asthma as a long-term health condition.

› The impact of diabetes on children's health is often severe, both during childhood and later in life.

What kinds of medication are they taking?

The kinds of medications they are taking depends on the young person's age and condition. Some of the medicines prescribed for young people include:

› analgesics (painkillers)
› cold and 'flu medications
› influenza, booster and other vaccinations
› antibiotics for infections

› medications to treat asthma, eczema, hayfever and other allergic conditions
› insulin and other medications for diabetes
› benzodiazepines (minor tranquillisers) for anxiety, stress and other conditions
› anti-depressants to treat depression, anxiety disorders and eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia
› medications to treat specific conditions, such as epilepsy
› stimulant medication to treat attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

What problems can be caused by mixing alcohol and medication?

› Alcohol can interfere with and reduce the effectiveness of medicines, including prescribed, over-the-counter and complementary (alternative) medicines.

› With certain medications, alcohol can cause problems such as nausea, stomach cramps and vomiting.

› A single alcoholic drink with some medications can cause drowsiness or dizziness, which can be particularly dangerous for travel, especially when crossing roads on foot or by bicycle. It may be difficult to concentrate on school or other work.

› Some medications increase the intoxicating effects of alcohol.

› Drinking alcohol with more than one kind of medication means there is a greater risk of increasing the effects of alcohol and/or decreasing the effectiveness of the medication.

Which medications interact with alcohol?

› Alcohol is a depressant drug, which means that it depresses (slows down) the central nervous system. Messages between the brain and the body are slowed down by alcohol, so a person's reaction time, coordination and concentration can be affected. That's alcohol on its own—taken with medication, its effects can be increased or worsened, even when drinking at low levels.

- Alcohol can be particularly dangerous, even lethal, when used with medications that have similar, depressant effects. For example, many people take benzodiazepines (minor tranquillisers e.g. Valium) safely under medical supervision. However, when combined with alcohol, they can have severe health consequences.
- Alcohol should be avoided when taking medications for mental health issues (for example, anti-depressants) and for blood pressure.
- Some herbal preparations can interact with alcohol.

Special considerations and tips

- It is difficult to predict the response to mixing alcohol with medication—it varies from person to person. That's why it is important to consult your doctor, pharmacist or other health professional if there is a chance that your teenager may drink alcohol while he or she is on medication.

Read the label

- Prescription medication usually comes with a label listing the doctor's instructions and a pamphlet with the manufacturer's advice. Check these for harmful interactions with alcohol and follow the advice carefully. If you are unsure, contact your doctor or pharmacist for further advice.
- For non-prescription medications, such as over-the-counter analgesics (painkillers) or alternative (herbal) treatments, the manufacturer's product description should provide information on any possible side-effects and/or other problems that may occur when taken with alcohol or other medications.
- Ask your pharmacist for a Consumer Medicines Information sheet.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist

- If you are concerned or unsure about the effects of alcohol with any medication, your doctor, pharmacist or other health practitioner can advise on the best approach. Make sure you tell them of all the medication your child may be taking, including over-the-counter, prescription or herbal medicines.

If in doubt, don't drink alcohol if:

- The information you need is unavailable or you are unable to contact a health professional; it may be best to avoid alcohol until you can be certain that it won't affect the medication.
- You have recently had a vaccination. Currently not much is known about the effects of alcohol on vaccinations. However, pharmacists advise that it may be best to avoid alcohol for at least two days after any vaccination.

- You have a serious medical condition. Regardless of age, anyone with a serious medical condition such as epilepsy or diabetes, or who is taking anti-depressant medication, is advised to avoid alcohol.

Further considerations

- If you are unsure, stop drinking alcohol; do not stop taking your medication.
- Talk to your teenager.
- It is important that your teenager understands the possible effects of mixing alcohol with his or her medication. Honest, open communication works best. Use trigger points such as 'How do you feel about…' to start a conversation about alcohol and medication.
- When you have your teenager's attention, explain the potential harms of drinking alcohol when on medication, but be cautious about using 'scare tactics'. Many young people tend to feel invincible ('It won't happen to me'), so it's important to be realistic.

Refusal strategies

- Find opportunities (for example, when you and your teenager visit the doctor) to discuss ways to refuse alcohol. Ultimately, the decision to drink or avoid alcohol will be your teenager's but you can influence that decision by providing safe and healthy alternatives. For example, rather than suggesting to your teenager 'Just say no', offer some strategies they will find acceptable, like 'No thanks, I don't want to mess with my medication', or 'I'm just not in the mood right now'.
- Think about how difficult it can be for adults to say no to alcohol in social situations. For example, women may be assumed to be pregnant and men are often teased about being a 'wuss' if they refuse alcohol. Teenagers may be embarrassed about revealing that they are taking medication, or they might want to retain their privacy about medical matters. Be sensitive to their needs and offer suggestions that they can incorporate into their own 'language'.

Further information/Where to get help

- For information on the effects of alcohol and other drugs, go to www.druginfo.adf.org.au.
- To 'Ask your Pharmacist' go to beta.guild.org.au/askyourpharmacist/content.asp?id=556.
- For tips on communicating with your teenager, see Fact sheet 7: Teenage drinking: Parents' communication style can make a difference.

Teenagers & alcohol

ADF Australian Drug Foundation
• preventing drug problems •

State Government Victoria
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development