

Can alcohol cause seizures?

The relationship between alcohol, epilepsy and seizures is a complex issue and worth discussing with the doctor. Seizures related to alcohol abuse are more common than with any other form of substance abuse. Alcohol can trigger or worsen seizures when associated with alcoholism or 'binge' drinking.



Most alcohol related seizures occur with:

- ◆ **Alcohol withdrawal** – Seizures can occur within the first 36-72 hours after a chronic drinker suddenly stops drinking. If these seizures occur frequently and the alcohol abuse has occurred over years, degeneration of brain tissue may result. This can lead to the development of epilepsy and chronic seizures.
- ◆ **Alcohol toxicity** – This happens when someone has ingested large amounts of alcohol and the concentration in the bloodstream is poisonous to the body.
- ◆ **Excessive fluid and metabolic changes in the body** – Drinking large amounts of alcohol over a short period of time will create an imbalance of fluids and electrolytes in the body, causing a dehydrating effect.
- ◆ **Trauma** – Injuries may occur from accidents or falls while the person is intoxicated.
- ◆ **Vitamin or nutritional deficiencies** – Chronic alcohol abuse will affect the absorption of vitamins and is often associated with unhealthy diet.
- ◆ **Not taking medications** – Chronic or binge drinking can result in poor memory, missed medications and lack of routine. Not taking antiepileptic medications can cause prolonged withdrawal seizures.

How alcohol affects antiepileptic medications

People taking antiepileptic medications are likely to be more sensitive to the effects of alcohol. Alcohol can interfere with the metabolism of these medications and therefore increase the chance of seizures. Some medications can enhance the effects of alcohol and people can feel intoxicated after drinking only a small amount.

Missing a dose, taking extra medication or altering the time of taking regular antiepileptic medications before drinking will not alter this reaction and may cause additional adverse effects or seizures.

Can people with epilepsy drink alcohol?

Opinions vary, and some medical professionals recommend that alcohol should be avoided at all times when taking antiepileptic medications, while others say a moderate amount will do no harm. Alcohol intake in small amounts usually does not increase seizure frequency or significantly affect levels of antiepileptic medications. The effects of alcohol differ greatly from person to person, but adults with epilepsy should be able to consume alcohol in small amounts. It is not advisable to drink alcohol if seizures related to intake have occurred in the past.

It is important to talk to a doctor about the possible effects of alcohol on seizure frequency and medication before drinking.

What is moderate drinking?

The meaning of drinking alcohol in moderation can vary from person to person, as does the distinction between 'social' drinking and 'problem' drinking.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) suggests **for healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day (reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury)**. This recommendation is for healthy individuals. Although most complications with seizures and alcohol generally occur with chronic or binge drinking, having a chronic health condition such as epilepsy can alter what is considered "safe" drinking.

Why people with epilepsy need to be cautious about alcohol:

1. Alcohol can mix poorly with antiepileptic medications preventing them from reaching the necessary levels in the bloodstream to control seizures.
2. Large amounts of alcohol can trigger seizures.
3. Alcohol can create an imbalance of fluid and electrolytes within the body.
4. Alcohol consumption is often associated with late nights, sleep deprivation, missed meals and forgotten medications, all of which can trigger seizures.
5. The effects of alcohol can increase significantly when combined with antiepileptic medication.

Everyone should have at least two alcohol-free days a week.

REFERENCES

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- > Devinsky, O, Gordon, E. Epilepsia 2001 Oct;42(10): 1266-72. Alcohol and Marijuana: effects on epilepsy and use by patients with epilepsy
- > www.nhmrc.gov.au

This information is given to provide accurate, general information about epilepsy. Medical information and knowledge changes rapidly and you should consult your doctor for more detailed information. This is not medical advice and you should not make any medication or treatment changes without consulting your doctor.