Epilepsy Action Australia

19.12.2025

ALCOHOL AND EPILEPSY

FACT SHEET

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ALCOHOL AND EPILEPSY

Some people with epilepsy are more sensitive to alcohol than others. For some, drinking alcohol can trigger seizures.

Seizures related to alcohol misuse seem to be more common than with any other form of substance. Seizures are often linked to heavy or binge drinking.

Can alcohol cause seizures?

Many alcohol related seizures can be linked with:

- Alcohol withdrawal – seizures can occur 12 to 48 hours after a person who drinks heavily suddenly stops. If these seizures happen often and there is long-term alcohol abuse, the brain may be damaged, which can lead to developing epilepsy.
- Alcohol toxicity – This is less common but can happen when a large amount of alcohol is ingested (binge) in a short time and the alcohol can be toxic to the body.
- ⚠️ Note: If you're drinking heavily and want to stop, it's important to seek medical support.
- Fluid and metabolic imbalance – Heavy drinking over a short period of time affects electrolytes, particularly beer. These imbalances can increase seizure risk.
- Trauma – Drinking increases the risk of head injuries from accidents or falls while the person is intoxicated.
- Vitamin or nutritional deficiencies – Long term alcohol misuse will affect the absorption of nutrients and is often associated with unhealthy diet.
- Not taking medications – Long term heavy drinking can lead to poor memory, missed medications and lack of routine.

! People taking antiseizure medication are likely to be more sensitive to the effects of alcohol

- Alcohol can interfere with the uptake of medication and possibly increase the chance of seizures.
- Some antiseizure medications can enhance the effects of alcohol and make you feel drunk after drinking a small amount.
- Skipping, doubling, or changing the timing of your medication does not reduce alcohol's effects and may increase your seizure risk.

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CAN PEOPLE WITH EPILEPSY DRINK ALCOHOL?

If you've had a reaction or increase in seizures connected with alcohol in the past, then it is best to avoid it.

Light or occasional alcohol use (1-2 standard drinks per occasion) doesn't usually affect seizure control or medication levels for most adults with epilepsy. However, effects vary between individuals.

It's best to speak with your doctor about how alcohol might affect your type of epilepsy and your medications.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends drinking no more than two standard drinks per day. This is for healthy individuals.

Many people with epilepsy choose to drink considerably less than these recommended amounts because having a health condition such as epilepsy can change what is considered "safe" drinking especially if you have poorly controlled seizures, specific epilepsy types, or are taking certain medications.

Some types of epilepsy may be more sensitive to alcohol ingestion.

Alcohol and high energy drinks

An "energy drink" is non-alcoholic, but usually contains caffeine, taurine, guarana and other substances, such as ginkgo and ginseng. Large amounts of energy drinks may lead to rapid heart rate, vomiting, heart rhythm problems, seizures, and in extreme cases, death.

Energy drinks can mask the effects of alcohol, so you may drink more than intended. The combination has also been associated with increased risk-taking behaviour.

Mixing alcohol and energy drinks may cause symptoms such as heart palpitations, problems sleeping, feeling tense or agitated, or possibly cause anxiety and panic attacks. The risk of seizures is also likely to be higher with this combination.

Mixing alcohol with other substances

Alcohol combined with illicit drugs or other medications increases the risk of:

- Severe seizures
- Overdose
- Stronger effects of substances taken
- Dangerous interactions
- ⚠️ *Note: There is little specific research on this for people with epilepsy, but combining alcohol with other drugs is potentially very harmful.*

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CAUTION WITH ALCOHOL

Alcohol can mix poorly with antiseizure medication, preventing it from being effective.

Large amounts of alcohol can trigger seizures.

Alcohol can cause fluid and electrolyte imbalance, and dehydration.

Binge drinking is linked with late nights, poor sleep, missed meals and forgotten medications, all of which increase seizure risk.

Antiseizure medication can enhance the effects of alcohol making you feel “drunk” more quickly.

IF YOU WANT TO DRINK ALCOHOL

TIPS:

- Drink in small amounts
- Drink slowly
- Drink low alcohol drinks or “mocktails”
- Alternate alcohol and non-alcoholic drinks
- Avoid bingeing, or drinking large amounts of alcohol at once
- Don't make it an all-nighter
- If alcohol has triggered seizures in the past, or you feel unwell or unsafe drinking, it’s best to avoid it altogether.

Speak to your neurologist or GP for further advice about:

- How alcohol may affect your seizures
- Whether your medications interact with alcohol
- Safe limits or whether to avoid alcohol completely

Further information:

- Alcohol and drugs
- Medicines and alcohol

Visit our website

Contact us:

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Book a telehealth appointment with an epilepsy nurse

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Disclaimer: 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.