

What's Grog Got To Do With It ?



Important information for people with mental or emotional problems

Alcohol is the most widely used drug in Australia. Most men and women enjoy a social drink, and some forms of alcohol in small amounts may even help prevent heart attacks. But there are also risks involved in using alcohol some of which are higher for people with psychiatric problems. This pamphlet answers some of the questions you should ask before you decide to have a drink.

Does alcohol cause mental illness?

Hallucinations, paranoia and anxiety are common results of heavy drinking and withdrawal. Usually these wear off within a week or two of quitting. But even in small amounts, alcohol can cause vulnerable people to become psychotic.

Long term or heavy use of alcohol damages brain cells and other parts of the nervous system, leading to problems with concentration, memory, judgment and controlling your emotions. These effects can become permanent.

If you have psychological problems, you should know that drinking leads to more relapses, depression and suicidal feelings and you become more likely to require psychiatric treatment in a hospital. Drinkers are more likely to be taken to hospital against their will. They often take longer to recover their mental health than non

drinkers. If you suffer from depression, anxiety, phobias, panic or post-traumatic stress disorder your chance of developing alcoholism doubles.

Depression, Anxiety & Alcohol

People with the blues soon learn that drowning your sorrows doesn't work. But depression can make a drinking problem worse or lead to a relapse after a long period of sobriety. Alcohol is a powerful drug with a depressant action, and it isn't surprising that even a few drinks can make you feel sad and lonely. Long sessions or regular drinking can lead to deep depression which can go on for weeks after your last drink.

While grog does nothing to relieve depression, small amounts put off worry for a while (which usually means the things you are worried about don't get fixed). Family and other relationships can be hurt by excessive drinking. Work or financial problems make things even worse so that guilt and shame add to your depression. People also use drink to cope with anxiety, shyness and tension. Unfortunately the effects don't last, and in higher doses, alcohol actually makes things worse. It is good at first, but as your body becomes used to it, you need more and more alcohol to get

the same effect, until it reaches the point where stress, worry and anxiousness actually gets worse. **Schizophrenia and Alcohol**

People with schizophrenia are very vulnerable to the effects of alcohol. Some use drink as a kind of self-medication. It doesn't get rid of the symptoms, but it can make them easier to put up with. As the alcohol wears off, the symptoms come back even stronger. Withdrawal makes things worse because it brings its own paranoid feelings, fears and hallucinations. More than half the people with schizophrenia become problem drinkers.

Bipolar Disorder and Alcohol

Having bipolar disorder (also called manic-depressive illness) makes drinking alcohol very risky. People with this condition are 5 times more likely to become addicted or to develop an alcohol problem. It also interferes with the medications prescribed to control mood swings (see below).

Is alcohol addictive?

Alcohol is addictive; it only takes a few weeks of regular

drinking before the body needs extra alcohol or stronger drink to keep working or prevent withdrawal. People who rely on alcohol to help them cope with stress, insomnia or negative feelings are very vulnerable to

"there are also risks involved in using alcohol some of which are higher for people with psychiatric problems."

Taking any other drug, including medication, when you have been drinking makes the effects unpredictable

Alcohol and Other Drugs

Alcohol & Marijuana ~ Both lower the blood pressure and both affect your balance and judgment. When you drink and use pot, the effects are more than just adding them together. Alcohol acts like an anaesthetic; too much can suppress your breathing and stop your heart. Before reaching that stage, most people will have thrown up, which is the body's way of getting rid of poisons. But THC (the active part of marijuana) prevents vomiting, and this can lead to alcoholic poisoning, organ damage and even death. It's rare, but it does happen. Similar problems occur with other drugs which depress the body's nervous system, including heroin, sleeping tablets and Valium type drugs.

Alcohol & Stimulants ~ Even though alcohol and speed have opposite effects, they have some things in common: using either one increases the risk of getting into violent situations. If you use them together, the risk increases enormously. If you use speed, XTC is based on and similar with alcohol, the chance of an overdose is increased. The alcohol also masks the sedative effect of alcohol, without improving your reflexes or judgment: it just makes you a more alert drunk!

Alcohol and Heroin ~ Alcohol is probably the main cause of heroin deaths. Smoking or hitting up heroin by itself, even stronger or purer doses, seldom causes a coma or death, but alcohol

increases the sedative and anaesthetic effect of heroin, leading to unconsciousness, coma and sometimes, death. Heroin and similar drugs reduce the reflex that stops liquids getting into your lungs. Since alcohol makes people throw up, it's easy to see how so many heroin users die by choking on their own vomit.

Alcohol and Medication

Alcohol is broken down in the liver by chemicals called "enzymes". The same liver enzymes are produced by many antidepressant, anticonvulsant and antipsychotic medications. The increase in these enzymes due to medication in your system can cause you to become addicted to alcohol more easily. More importantly, the high level of enzymes needed to break down alcohol causes these medications to stop working effectively, which can lead to a relapse of your mental illness, depression, or anxiety.

Because you sweat and pass more urine when you have alcohol, it is easy to get dehydrated. If you take **lithium carbonate** (prescribed for mood swings), this concentrates the lithium in your bloodstream, putting your lithium levels up. There is a danger of poisoning if the levels get too high.

Some **antidepressants** (especially the tricyclic kind) can also become poisonous if you drink while they are in your body.

Many of the **antipsychotic medications** are affected by alcohol. Largactil and Clozapine are two that just won't work properly if you are drinking. Drinkers need higher doses of their tablets or injections, which can lead to unpleasant side effects. Other medications can increase the chance that you will have a fit while you are drinking or when you stop. Melleril is one of these, but there are others,

and your doctors need to know how much and how often you drink so they can give you the safest medication in the dose which has the best chance of helping you get and stay well.

Many people take anti anxiety preparations like Valium. This and similar preparations like sleeping pills, mix badly with alcohol. Alcohol magnifies many of their side effects, like drowsiness and poor coordination. Alcohol + tranquilizers = overdose. If you use both, you will readily become dependent on both; your tolerance will increase and you will need higher doses of the drugs and the alcohol before they will work. Eventually they will stop working, but by then you may have become addicted and will feel worse when you cut down.

Alcohol and Sleep ~ Lots of people enjoy a relaxing drink before bed. If you start to rely on alcohol to help you sleep though, it will interfere with your Rapid Eye Movement (REM or dreaming) sleep, and after a while you will be waking too early, too tired, and too irritable. If you are vulnerable to depression or to hallucinations (such as hearing voices) you are very likely to have a relapse and may need treatment, perhaps in a detoxification unit or in a psychiatric ward.



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