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Be Merry, But Safe: IPC Urges Caution Mixing Alcohol and Prescription Medications

Poison Experts Remind the Public About Potentially Dangerous Combinations

CHICAGO - 'Tis the season to be jolly but mixing alcohol and prescription medications is no laughing matter. With holiday parties that involve alcohol consumption and an increasing number of people taking medications that interact with alcohol, Illinois Poison Center (IPC) experts are reminding the public of the potentially dangerous consequences of combining some medications with alcohol.

“With the growing use of multiple medications, including prescription and over-the counter, understanding their interaction with alcohol is essential,” said IPC Medical Director Michael Wahl, M.D. “Being informed about your medications and their effects can help keep you safe this holiday season.”

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), it is [estimated](#) 40% of adults took a medication in the past year that could interact negatively with alcohol. NIAAA cites about 5-6% of people who drink regularly are prescribed a sedative-hypnotic or opioid drug for at least 30 days, the combination of which can be deadly. NIAAA reports that adults over age 65 are at particularly high risk for harm, with about 80% of people aged 65 and older having taken a medication in the past year that could interact with alcohol. Both the size of this age group and the percentage taking alcohol-interactive medications are increasing.

IPC medical experts say [mixing alcohol with certain medicines](#) can cause nausea, vomiting, headaches, drowsiness, fainting, loss of coordination, internal bleeding or breathing difficulties. The type and severity of these reactions can depend on the medication, the amount of alcohol consumed and physical differences in weight, height or age. In addition, the risk of some drug interactions is higher for those who regularly consume large amounts of alcohol compared to less frequent drinkers.

Holiday revelers should always assume that certain types of medicine will interact with alcohol. For example, when mixed with alcohol:

- Medication for anxiety, depression, seizure control, or pain management can lead to drowsiness, dizziness and impairment, or even respiratory depression;

- Cough and cold medicine, sleep aids and other medications that cause drowsiness are more likely to lead to impairment;
- Some antibiotics and diabetes medications can lead to low blood pressure and abnormal heart rhythms; and
- The side effects of some prescription medications such as stomach pain or nausea can be worsened.

A more thorough [list of medications](#) that interact with alcohol can be found on the NIAAA [website](#). If taking any medicine, always check with a doctor or pharmacist before drinking alcohol to avoid potentially dangerous interactions. If someone experiences negative effects from combining alcohol and medication, call the IPC for expert medical help.

For a list of harmful interactions, [click here](#). For more information on medication safety and other topics from the IPC, [click here](#).

IPC's toxicology specialists, who serve most all languages, resolve over 90% of poison exposure cases over the phone, eliminating the need for referral to a healthcare facility or transport by ambulance. Calls to the IPC helpline (1-800-222-1222) are free and confidential. IPC experts are available to provide information and treatment advice 24 hours per day, 365 days per year, including holidays.

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The Illinois Poison Center is a nonprofit health service, operated by the Illinois Health and Hospital Association (IHA), that provides the people of Illinois with comprehensive and trusted information and treatment advice on potentially harmful substances via a free, confidential 24-hour helpline staffed by physicians, pharmacists and nurses.