

Alcohol and HIV

Does alcohol hurt the body in someone with HIV infection?

A little bit of alcohol occasionally does not have much effect on your body but alcohol can have many effects on the body if taken in large amounts or regularly even if someone does not have HIV infection. In the lungs, regular alcohol use can make the white blood cells, which protect the body from infection, not work as well to fight infections. In the brain, heavy alcohol use can kill off the cells in some parts of the brain. In the liver, especially in someone who also has chronic hepatitis B or C, regular alcohol use can lead to scarring of the liver, called fibrosis, that can possibly lead to liver death.

Does alcohol hurt my immune system?

Research has shown that alcohol makes the immune system not work as well in the lungs, leading to more infections such as pneumonia. It also causes an increase in production by the body in chemicals that can damage the lung. In monkeys used in research studies, regular alcohol use was shown to increase the viral load of the monkey HIV and lower the CD4 cells in the gut, leading to a worse immune system.

Does alcohol affect my HIV treatment?

Regular alcohol use, such as daily use, has been seen to increase the activity of some of the enzymes in the body that break down some HIV medications, like the protease inhibitors and the non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors, which can mean that the levels of the medicines in the blood will be too low to really control the virus and lead to resistance. The enzyme that breaks down alcohol is also involved in breaking down an HIV medicine called abacavir (found in Ziagen, Epzicom, and Trizivir) so someone who drinks alcohol frequently can get too high of levels of this drug in their system and increase the side effects.

Studies have also shown that alcohol use can interfere with remembering to take your HIV medications. One study showed that even drinking two drinks with alcohol in them a day increases your chance of forgetting to take your HIV medicines by about 60%. If you don't drink often but drink a lot when you do (called binge drinking), you are also more likely to forget to take your medicines when you have been drinking. This leads to an increase in resistance and a bigger chance of your medicines not working for you anymore.

Does alcohol cause any other problems in terms of my HIV?

Many studies from around the world show that alcohol use, as well as other drug use such as cocaine or crystal meth, make it more likely that you will have unsafe sex (without a condom), increasing the chance you will infect someone else and possibly putting you at more risk for another strain of HIV or another sexually transmitted disease such as syphilis or gonorrhea.

**If you have further questions, be sure to talk to your primary care provider
or your health educator or nurse.**



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