

# What's the Real Deal With Drinking on Antibiotics?

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Healthy Living

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I have a friend that *always* seems to be sick. Each time our group of girlfriends gets together for a for a night out, she's on antibiotics. Now, true, I probably shouldn't care. But this particular friend is really fun! She's outgoing, likes to have a good time, and can be the life of the party. Is it bad that I think she's even funnier after a glass or two of wine? But without fail, right after she says "I'm on antibiotics," she says she can't drink. I hate to admit it, but there's a small part of me that wondered if—maybe for diet or other personal reasons—the antibiotics are just an excuse.

And that got me thinking: are they even a *good* excuse? Can you *really* not drink on antibiotics? Does just a glass of wine affect the medication? I took it upon myself to talk with some doctors to find out the truth surrounding the mixing of alcohol and antibiotics.

Antibiotics are generally prescribed as treatment for bacterial infections, such as urinary tract infection or pneumonia, explains Jacqueline Mayo, MD, assistant professor of clinical medicine at Weill Cornell Medical, and physician at New York-Presbyterian Hospital. If you mix them with a small amount of alcohol, the antibiotics don't exactly stop working, but here's why doctors do suggest limiting your cocktails while on the meds.

Most antibiotics are metabolized or broken down by enzymes in your liver. "Drinking alcohol may speed up or slow down these enzymes, resulting in too much or too little of the drug circulating through the body, causing either toxicity or ineffectiveness," says Mayo.

Drinking can also ratchet up the negative side effects of the drugs. Common side effects of antibiotics are nausea, diarrhea, and sometimes dizziness or drowsiness. Rashes can also occur if the person taking the antibiotic is exposed to an excessive amount of sunlight. A few varieties of antibiotics, when combined with booze, cause severe nausea, vomiting, and bright red flushing of the skin, explains Mayo. "You should not drink any alcohol while on trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole, metronidazole or tinadazol, as it can cause flushing of the skin, palpitations or heart racing, vomiting diarrhea and headache," says Margarita Rohr, M.D., clinical instructor in the Department of Medicine at the Joan H. Tisch Center for Women's Health at NYU Langone Medical Center. "Certain antibiotics may also cause hepatitis, which is inflammation of the liver, so it would not be a good idea to add another agent like

alcohol that may also cause inflammation of the liver," says Rohr.

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Drinking while on antibiotics can also heighten the effects of the alcohol, explains Rohr. "It can increase feelings of lightheadedness and drowsiness," she says.

Another reason to avoid booze? "When recovering from an infection, one of the most important pieces of advice I give my patients is to stay well hydrated," says Mayo. Alcohol dehydrates the body, so it can distract your body from healing. "Rest is also important for recovery, and alcohol is well-known to disrupt restorative sleep," says Mayo.

Having said all this, one glass of wine on one or two occasions during an antibiotic treatment is probably fine for most people, Mayo admits. "But there's no practical way to figure out in advance how much alcohol is safe with an given medication, so it's best to avoid it all together," she says. After all, a treatment is generally only seven to 10 days.

So if my friend is truly sitting out the night because she's taking these medications, well, at least it seems like a good reason to abstain.

