

Clozapine and alcohol – The risks

This factsheet gives information on the potential risks of drinking alcohol if you are taking the medication clozapine. It is for people who take clozapine in England and for their carers, friends, and relatives.

Key Points.

- Clozapine is an antipsychotic medication. It is used to treat the symptoms of schizophrenia and other psychosis related conditions.
- Clozapine and alcohol together can cause your nervous system to slow down, which can be dangerous. Sometimes, life-threatening.
- If you get symptoms of central nervous system depression, get immediate medical help.
- If you are prescribed clozapine, discuss alcohol use with your healthcare professional.
- Alcohol can affect clozapine and other antipsychotics in other ways.
- There can be other risks when taking clozapine.
- If you take antipsychotics, you should be offered regular physical health checks.

This factsheet covers:

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3. [How else can alcohol affect clozapine and other antipsychotics?](#)
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1. What is clozapine?

Clozapine is an antipsychotic medication.

Antipsychotic medications are mainly used to treat the symptoms of schizophrenia and other psychosis related conditions.

Clozapine can also be known by its trade names of Clozaril, Denzapine, and Zaponex.¹

Clozapine is usually offered to people who are treatment resistant.² This means other medications have not helped reduce or control symptoms well enough.

You should only usually be offered Clozapine if you have tried 2 other antipsychotics.³

You can find more information about:

- Antipsychotics
- Drugs, alcohol, and mental health
- Psychosis
- Schizophrenia

at www.rethink.org. Or call our us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

2. Why can alcohol use and clozapine be risky?

If you take clozapine, drinking alcohol can be risky.⁴

The NHS say:⁵

- there are risks when drinking alcohol while taking clozapine,
- it can cause central nervous system depression, which can cause the brain and nervous system to slow down, and
- if the nervous system slows down too much, it can be life-threatening.

The NHS Specialist Pharmacy Service website also warns about the risks of central nervous system depression caused by alcohol and clozapine: www.sps.nhs.uk/articles/clinical-considerations-for-patients-prescribed-clozapine. It says patients should be made aware of the risk.⁶

The British National Formulary (BNF) is a UK medications guide used by psychiatrists and other healthcare professionals in the NHS.

The BNF has an online guide on clozapine interactions here:
<https://bnf.nice.org.uk/interactions/clozapine>

The BNF online guide also warns of the risk of central nervous system depression caused by alcohol and clozapine. It says the risks could range from sedation to unconsciousness, coma, respiratory depression, and cardiovascular depression.⁷

Sedation means being very sleepy or relaxed. Respiratory depression means when you breathe too slowly or too shallowly.⁸

BNF does not say what it means by cardiovascular depression. It could mean more than one thing. So, we have written to NICE, who publish the BNF, to ask what they mean. When they reply we will update this information.

It is very important you:

- discuss alcohol use with your healthcare professional, and
- carefully read your medication patient information leaflet to see what it says about alcohol use. The box your medication comes in should include a patient information leaflet. See below for how you can get a copy of the leaflet.

The symptoms of central nervous system depression are:⁹

- Over sedated or unusually sleepy.
- More confused or forgetful than normal.
- Un-coordinated, slow reflexes or difficulty moving. Un-coordinated means your body movements are not working smoothly together.
- Slurred speech.
- Breathing unusually slowly or have other breathing difficulties.
- A slow pulse or heart rate.
- A dry mouth.
- Blue lips.
- Clammy, cold skin.

You should get help straight away by calling 999 if you or a loved one show signs of the symptoms above.

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3. How else can alcohol affect clozapine and other antipsychotics?

Alcohol can affect clozapine and other antipsychotics in other ways. So, you should:

- discuss with your healthcare professional how alcohol use can affect you if you take antipsychotics, and
- carefully read your medication patient information leaflet to see what it says about alcohol use. The box your medication comes in should include the leaflet. See below for how you can get a copy of the leaflet.

Drinking alcohol with antipsychotics might increase the sedative effects.¹⁰ This means you might feel very tired.

Alcohol can cause sedation, which might affect your ability to:¹¹

- drive, even if you are under the legal alcohol limit, or
- do skilled tasks, like operate machinery.

You can talk to your healthcare professional about these things.

You can find more information about Driving and mental illness at www.rethink.org. Or call our us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

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4. How can I get a copy of a patient information leaflet?

You can get a copy of a patient information leaflet for your medication online.

You can do this by visiting the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) website at:
<https://products.mhra.gov.uk/substance-index>

Be sure to search for exactly the right type of medication. There might be several different types of the same medication. Look at your medication box for the right type.

If you have any questions about your medication, you can also speak to:

- your psychiatrist,
- your GP, or
- a pharmacist.

You can find more information about GPs and your mental health at www.rethink.org. Or call our us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

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5. Are there other risks when taking clozapine?

Is there a risk my white blood cell number will drop?

The main risk is clozapine can cause your white blood cell numbers to drop.¹²

Drops in white blood cells can lead to infections. You will need regular blood tests to make sure your white blood cell count is healthy.¹³

Your health professional should invite you to have blood tests. You will need:¹⁴

- weekly blood tests for the first 18 weeks, then
- for the next year, you will need blood tests every 2-weeks, then,
- blood test should be done once a month.

You will be asked to stop taking clozapine if your white blood cell numbers start dropping.¹⁵

You will have another blood test after you have stopped clozapine to make sure they are back to normal.

What about other side effects?

Clozapine can also cause other side effects. Common ones including pooling of saliva in the mouth, weight gain, severe constipation, and a fast heartbeat.¹⁶

You can read about possible side effects in the patient information leaflet or ask your healthcare professional about them.

You can find more information about:

- Antipsychotics
- Medication - Choice and managing problems

at www.rethink.org. Or call us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

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6. Should I get physical health checks?

If you take antipsychotics, you should be offered regular physical health checks for certain things.¹⁷

This is because antipsychotics can cause risks and side effects, like weight gain.¹⁸

If you are not getting these regular physical health checks, you can speak to your GP.

You can read our information on:

- Severe mental illness and physical health checks
- Physical activity and mental health

at www.rethink.org.

You can find more information about Antipsychotics at www.rethink.org. Or call us on 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

References

Did this help?

We would love to know if this information helped you or if you found any issues with this page. You can email us at feedback@rethink.org

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This factsheet is available in large print

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