Dear Alice,

I REALLY could use your help to help me prove that my school's health center is giving out false information to its students. Recently, a friend received the meningitis vaccine. She then called the health center and asked if it would be harmful to drink alcohol after getting the shot. The nurse said, "Yes, yes, don't drink!!" My roommate and I are nursing students; we checked in drug guides, went to governmental websites, everything. Not once does it say it's contraindicated, but it never explicitly states it's ok to drink and receive the vaccine. Personally, because of the very nature of vaccines (attenuated virus) rather than a med., I don't see how it's possible... BUT, can you find out for sure? This is important because it really bothers me that nurses would intentionally give out false info. just because they don't want students to drink in general.

Sincerely,
Nursing Girl

Answer

Dear Nursing Girl,

Your and your friend's interest in knowing what could happen when combining alcohol with a vaccine is a great consideration. Many people don't realize how serious certain combinations may be. The recommendation from the nurse may have been due to the fact that alcohol may suppress the immune system, making it easier to acquire various illnesses or as a general precaution. However, in this case, there are no specific recommendations against alcohol consumption after vaccination.

Some health care professionals may recommend against alcohol consumption for a few days after receiving a vaccine to limit any possible interactions between the alcohol and the vaccine as a safety precaution. This is similar to why you wouldn't want to mix alcohol with certain medications, such as antibiotics [2]. Alcohol might also mask any symptoms that may be the result of the vaccine itself, which could be another reason health care providers want their patients to abstain from drinking.

Unfortunately, most studies looking at alcohol and vaccinations were done using animal models
and subsequent translation to human health is difficult to make directly. However, with respect to acquiring meningitis [3], alcohol may play a minor role. It's possible that excessive alcohol consumption — 15 or more drinks a week — as well as other factors, including poor diet, smoking, and insufficient sleep or physical activity, may depress the immune system and, subsequently, increase the risk of bacterial and viral infections. However, some studies have shown up to a seven-fold increase in susceptibility to infections such as bacterial pneumonia and an increased incidence of tuberculosis infection among chronic heavy drinkers.

Ultimately, there isn't evidence to suggest that having a glass of wine or two will affect the efficacy of the meningitis vaccine, but excessive alcohol consumption may be detrimental to your immune system and overall health. With that said, it's the responsibility of health care providers to be able to provide information and reasons to help patients understand their options. Having access to complete and comprehensive information is key to making informed decisions about your health. If you feel your provider hasn't shared enough information, you can ask more questions until you feel you have the information you need.

As an informed consumer, if a health care provider offers you advice or a prohibition in the future, you might ask, "May I ask why?" or, "Help me to understand what drinking could do..." Sometimes it's hard to ask questions when there's limited time or your provider seems unapproachable. But remember, you're the consumer and it's your body — you have a right to be an active participant in your own care. Soon, you too may be offering education for your patients so it's great that you're asking questions when their advice is unclear.

Alice!
Category:
Alcohol & Other Drugs [4]
Alcohol [5]
Immunizations, Screenings, & Tests [6]

Related questions

Meningitis: Should I get the vaccine? [7]
Grapefruit juice and drug interactions? [8]
What's up with FluMist? [9]
Alcohol habit forming? [10]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
Medical Services (CUIMC) [12]
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