

## Negative side effects of absinthe? <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

I recently drank one shot of absinth(e) mixed with water at a party. I read up on it online and opinions differ vastly as to the potential for negative side effects. At this point my imagination has me suffering every possible one.

I would like to know the true possible effects and if one drink could realistically cause them. If it helps, the brand I had contained 100mg of thujone and it was Czech and I'm told they use an extract which is worse than using straight wormwood.

I hope you can help because I'm a little freaked out, the guy who gave it to me drank it extensively and recently committed suicide and I'm convinced the cause in part was the Absinthe.

### Answer

Dear Reader,

Absinthe is a libation with quite a history. As an herb-infused alcoholic beverage, it was euphemistically referred to as the "Green Fairy" due to its emerald sheen. You mention that the absinthe you imbibed contained thujone, a compound that comes from wormwood oil found in some varieties of absinthe. Thujone has been known to slow reaction times and impair a person's ability to pay attention. It also may cause visual or auditory hallucinations for some people. That being said, more recent research suggests that absinthe (containing wormwood oil) has a high alcohol concentration, which may be a more likely culprit for the purported side effects, rather than just thujone alone. It would follow then that your single drink is unlikely to result in any lasting effects. Additionally, it's likely that the cause of your acquaintance's suicide is much more complex than simply drinking absinthe. In fact, untreated depression is a leading cause of suicide. Use of drugs, including alcohol, is one way people try to deal with depression <sup>[2]</sup> or other mental health illnesses.

As far as your questions about negative side effects, the emerald beverage has mystified researchers since it first rose to fame in Europe at the end of the 19th century. People who drank it frequently began hallucinating, having seizures, experiencing vision impairment, and having cognitive troubles. At that time, "absinthism" (addiction to absinthe) was blamed for causing

madness and criminal behavior. Because of this not-so-good reputation, it was banned in many countries including the United States.

Although possession and sale of thujone-free absinthe is legal in the U.S., the internet has made it possible to obtain absinthe containing thujone from countries like the Czech Republic where it is legal. In the European Union (EU), absinthe can contain no more than 35 mg of thujone per liter of absinthe. The 100 mg label you saw was likely the size of the bottle itself, with 35 mg of the contents or less being thujone. However, it's possible that the amount of thujone you had was even lower than that: recent analyses of thujone content in absinthe have shown that many don't even exceed two mg/l.

Currently, there's not a whole lot of ongoing research on it because absinthe is no longer as widely consumed. It is known, however, that since it has a high concentration of alcohol, it's difficult to separate the effects of thujone from the standard effects of alcohol. That being the case, many of the problems that were historically attributed to absinthe — irresponsible or erratic behavior, withdrawal, dependence, and serious health problems such as brain damage — may have been due to alcohol intoxication rather than the thujone itself. And just like with other drugs, each person's body will respond differently.

All this to say, your brief rendezvous (in the form of one shot) with the Green Fairy is not very likely to lead to any negative side effects. Hope this information eases some of your worries!

Alice!

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