

## HOW CAN I MINIMISE THE RISK OF A DRUG INTERACTION?

### Talk to your doctor about ALL of your drugs.

While often unpredictable in each individual, some drug combinations have been reported as being potentially more serious than others. Make sure that you can find a nonjudgmental doctor that you can freely talk to about recreational drug use and your other medications. Your local AIDS Council or PLWA group will have referral lists of doctors who are able to talk freely and have some experience in dealing with these issues. Remember, it is not just the HIV medications that can cause potential problems. Also, ask about the impact of alcohol on any of your medications.

### Always consider drug interactions a possibility if having drug related health problems

In the event of a potentially serious life threatening drug related health problem, make sure that your doctor knows what you have been taking. Some people are afraid of disclosing illegal drug use, but it could save your life. Doctors and nurses are bound through confidentiality not to disclose the information to the police.

## TIPS TO REDUCE THE RISKS

Taking the following precautions might reduce the risk of interactions between HIV drugs and illicit drugs. These are principles that can be applied regardless of the specifics of particular interactions.

### Less may be more

Reduce the amount of any illicit drug you take. Take only a quarter to one third of the amount you usually take.

### Talk about it

Discuss any illicit drugs you use or plan to use with a doctor you can trust.

When you are using recreational drugs, tell your friends what you have taken, and how much. In the event of a drug related health problem occurring after taking the drugs, it will be your friends who will have to help you with medical treatment. They will need to be able to tell health professionals what you have taken. For this reason, it is a good idea not to take recreational drugs alone.

### Time apart

Avoid taking other drugs at the same time as your HIV antiviral medication. Staggering your drug-taking could reduce the chance of interactions occurring, but it won't necessarily prevent it.

### If you have had a bad combination in the past, don't take it again

If you have taken a particular combination of drugs in the past which made you feel weird, or if you suspect or know that you experienced an interaction, then don't risk taking that combination again. People who have had a particular drug interaction are at very high risk of it recurring.

### Short treatment breaks are the worst

It might be tempting to stop taking your HIV antivirals if you're planning to party for a while. Although taking a break from your antivirals may eliminate the risk of some drug interactions, it allows HIV to replicate and increases the chance of drug resistance developing. For more information about taking breaks, see the AFAO/NAPWA leaflet called You may be ready to party, but your drugs still have to work or talk to your doctor.

### Seek help if worried

If, after taking any combination of drugs (or even single drugs), you start to feel weird, or think you might be experiencing a drug interaction (eg. if you are vomiting, feeling like you are about to pass out, or are dizzy or nauseous), don't be afraid to get help. Tell a friend, go to a first aid tent or medical center, call an ambulance or go to a hospital casualty department. It helps to have a plan of where to seek help if something was to go wrong, and discuss this with your friends. Have a low threshold for seeking medical help if there may be a drug related health problem.

### Learn about safe drug taking

There is much information available on safe drug taking and if you use recreational drugs, learn about how to protect yourself. For more information about safe drug use contact your local AIDS Council or PLWHA group.

### Contacts and who you can talk to...

Most people find it easier to keep taking their drugs when they can talk about them with other HIV positive people, their doctor, pharmacist, counsellor and friends. Some people choose to join a support group where they can share their experiences and learn from others. You can get information confidentially about different groups by calling your local AIDS Council.

For more information call the treatments officer at your local AIDS council. You may also want to talk to the PLWHA group, User group, or drug support/information service in your state.

For information about the effects of recreational drugs, go to [www.ceida.net.au](http://www.ceida.net.au) or call the Health Department in your State or Territory

### Further info...

For further information please contact the AIDS Council PLWA group in your state

AIDS Council of NSW 02 9206 2000

PLWHA (NSW) 02 9361 6011

Victorian AIDS Council 03 9865 6700

PLWHA (Vic) 03 9865 6772

Queensland AIDS Council 07 3017 1777

QPP 07 3844 1990

AIDS Council of South Australia 08 8362 1611

PLWHA(SA) 08 8293 3700

WA AIDS Council 08 9482 0000

TASCHARD 03 6234 1242

AACACT 02 6257 2855

NT AIDS Council 08 8941 1711

The AFAO parties website  
[www.afao.org.au/parties](http://www.afao.org.au/parties)  
also contains further information



AFAO/NAPWA do not recommend that PLWHAs change any HIV treatments without becoming fully informed of the risks and benefits of any changes.  
AFAO/NAPWA do not endorse the use of illegal drugs or the illicit use of prescription drugs. However, as some people in our community choose to use such drugs, this information is brought to you in the interests of health maintenance. This information is the most accurate at the time of publication.

*interactions*

*and dangerous*

*liaisons*

Interactions between  
anti-HIV and  
recreational (party) drugs

## What this Fact Sheet is about:

This Fact Sheet explains what drug interactions are and some general information about how they may arise. It gives information on how some recreational and prescription drugs may interact with your anti-HIV drugs. If you are on HIV treatments and either occasionally or regularly take recreational, or party drugs, or use prescription drugs recreationally, this Fact Sheet will provide you with information that may help you avoid dangers resulting from some drug combinations.

This Fact Sheet also contains some information about known or potential interactions between HIV treatment drugs and other prescription drugs that may occur (even) when both types of drugs are used as prescribed.

This Fact Sheet does not cover all of the potential interactions that may result from combining recreational drugs with each other (there are many possible interactions that cannot be properly covered here), but it does list some combinations that are known to be dangerous, and it will point you towards places where you can get more information on this question.

## HIV and recreational drugs

While there have been many anecdotal reports of interactions between HIV medications and recreational drugs, the most recent evidence gives a clearer picture, and highlights the fact that these effects can be potentially life threatening. Understanding how HIV drugs interact with various recreational drugs may help you make informed decisions about drug use.

## What is a drug interaction?

A drug interaction is a medical condition that results from the combined effect of taking different drugs at the same time. Drugs are broken down (or metabolized) in the body by the liver. Some of the potentially dangerous interactions between some HIV drugs and some other drugs result from the drugs being broken down by the same enzymes in the liver – and thus the drugs being broken down far more slowly when both drugs are present. This can result in the drugs remaining in your body too long or being present in higher doses.

## What are the symptoms of a drug interaction?

They can vary widely, depending on the drugs mixed. For example, taking alcohol with sleeping pills can cause dangerous drowsiness and loss of consciousness. Sometimes drug interactions can cause symptoms similar to drug overdoses and “bad trips”, but they are also capable of causing a very wide variety of symptoms.

Some of the possible symptoms and the warning signs are :-

- Severe sudden drowsiness
- Feeling extremely nauseous
- Vomiting
- Feeling like ‘passing out’

## How are drug interactions treated?

For some interactions, there are antidotes – standard treatments that counteract the effects of an interaction. In the case of other interactions, most people will still survive if they receive medical assistance soon after the onset of symptoms. Where deaths do occur, they are usually because the effect of the interaction is very sudden and severe (perhaps due to massive doses of drugs) OR because medical assistance is not sought soon enough.

## Will the police get involved?

Many deaths that could easily have been prevented have occurred because people have delayed seeking medical treatment for fear that police or other authorities will be involved. Paramedics and ambulance officers treat overdoses and drug interactions as health issues, not legal issues. It is not their normal practice to involve the police. So, if you, or a friend, are experiencing what you think is a drug overdose or interaction, you should not wait to call for medical help.

## How often do severe problems occur?

The incidence of severe problems due to drug interactions between HIV drugs and recreational drugs is low – and is related to the drugs involved and the dose and perhaps quality of the recreational drugs being used. A small number of people will have severe life threatening reactions, and there have been reported deaths in some situations.

## Drug interactions are highly variable between different people

Drug interactions vary between people and are therefore usually unpredictable. Just because a drug interaction has been reported, this does not mean that it will occur every time the two drugs are taken together. Also, while a known combination of drugs may be known to cause a potentially life threatening interaction, it does not necessarily follow that severe symptoms due to an interaction will occur in every case. There are also likely to be potentially serious drug interactions that we don't know about yet.

## It is not only HIV medications that can interact with recreational drugs

The assumption that recreational drug interactions only occur with HIV antiviral drugs is common and quite incorrect.

Most people on HIV drugs are often on other medications such as antidepressants, antibiotics and sleeping tablets. All of these medications can interact with recreational drugs. Some of them may inhibit the known ‘pleasurable’ effects of some recreational drugs. Some of them may make the effects more intense (as well as more dangerous). Whatever the assumed effect, increasing your ‘usual’ dose of recreational drugs because of a possible interaction is not recommended.

## Recreational drugs may contain many unknowns

Most illegal recreational drugs contain a combination of various substances, and these vary from batch to batch as there is no quality control in their production. The purity and strength of recreational drugs also varies a lot. These factors make drug interactions difficult to predict.

## A documented and potentially serious interaction : Ritonavir and ecstasy/amphetamines: a potentially dangerous cocktail

A dangerous drug interaction that has been associated with death is the mixture of the protease inhibitor, ritonavir and ecstasy (mixing ritonavir with amphetamine-like recreational drugs like speed, crystal meth, ice and MDA may also cause dangerous interactions). However, most people on ritonavir won't experience problems.

## Ritonavir and drug interactions: slow metabolisers most at risk

Ritonavir inhibits the breakdown of many substances and drugs in the body, including amphetamines and amphetamine like drugs. It also interacts with sleeping medications, antidepressants and many common HIV medications. Ritonavir does this by interfering with the body's system for breaking down and removing toxins and medications – a function which is carried out by the liver.

Some people's livers get rid of substances from the body much more slowly than others. These people (called ‘slow metabolisers’) are at increased risk of severe reactions when mixing medications and recreational drugs.

Unfortunately, IT IS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT WHO ARE SLOW METABOLISERS. There is a small number of people who are ‘very slow metabolisers’ who are at a very high risk of drug interactions.

## Drugs can interact in many other ways and other HIV medications can interact with other drugs

Not all interactions are due to problems that the liver may have in dealing with multiple drugs; there are many other ways that combinations of drugs can cause interactions. Problems may also result from the effects that some interactions have on your brain, lungs or nervous system.

## Methadone and efavirenz

Some people starting on efavirenz who are on methadone experience the symptoms of methadone withdrawal. These symptoms do not usually start for a week after commencing efavirenz. It may necessitate a change in the methadone dose which will have to be reduced again if efavirenz treatment stops. There is also documented interaction between methadone and AZT and ddI.

## St John's Wort and some anti-HIV drugs :

St John's Wort, a herbal anti-depressant, can affect the blood levels of all protease inhibitors and efavirenz and nevirapine. People who stop taking St John's Wort may experience toxicities caused by a rapid rebound in blood levels of certain prescription medications.

## Antidepressants and anti-HIV drugs :

Because some people are taking these in combination for long periods of time, managing interactions can be quite important and it can be a challenge finding the right antidepressant. Ritonavir in particular can cause an increase in the blood levels of the SSRI class (eg Prozac) of antidepressants. It is recommended for people with HIV who commence antidepressants and are taking antiviral medication that the normal starting dose of the antidepressant be reduced.

## Viagra

Viagra can interact with both prescription and illicit drugs. Ritonavir, saquinavir and possibly other protease inhibitors are among the drugs which can dangerously raise levels of Viagra in the bloodstream. The manufacturer of Viagra recommends that patients on ritonavir should not exceed a maximum single dose of 25mg of Viagra over a 48-hour period. Viagra comes in 100mg, 50mg and 25 mg doses, so check which dose you are on and discuss with your doctor whether you should reduce the dose of Viagra, or use it at all if you are taking protease inhibitors. This is an effect which is greatly exacerbated by amyl and other nitrates. Using amyl and Viagra without HIV drugs has caused some deaths. Using all three could make blood pressure suddenly drop to dangerous levels, causing dizziness, fainting, even a heart attack or stroke. Amphetamines can also cause major stress to the cardiovascular system. Using Viagra to counteract the diminished sexual performance of amphetamines may increase the risk of adverse cardiovascular events. Adding amyl or other nitrates and/or protease inhibitors as well will multiply this risk. Other prescription drugs which can interact with Viagra include the antifungal drugs ketoconazole or itraconazole (sometimes used to treat thrush) and the common antibiotic erythromycin. Age and other factors like pre-existing heart disease might also increase your risk.

## Alcohol is a drug too

Because alcohol is freely available, many people forget that it may interact with many medications. Always ask your doctor about the potential impact of alcohol on ALL medications that you take.