Can I drink alcohol after vaccination? [1]

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,

You and your friends' interest in knowing what could happen when combining alcohol with a vaccine is important. A lot of people don't realize how serious certain combinations can be. In this case, no clinical data are available about the safety of drinking alcohol post-vaccination for meningitis and other diseases. Most health care professionals, however, would recommend against alcohol consumption for a few days after receiving a vaccine, including the meningitis vaccine. By not drinking alcohol during this time, you limit any possible interactions between the alcohol and the vaccine, similar to the rationale when on medication. Abstaining from alcohol is also recommended so as not to mask any symptoms that may be the result of the vaccine itself.

Alcohol appears to play a role with respect to getting meningitis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), among other health organizations, for instance, recommends limiting alcohol intake (as well as not sharing drinks) to lower meningitis infection risk. It's also possible that excessive alcohol consumption ? 15 or more drinks a week ? as well as other factors, including poor diet, smoking, and insufficient sleep or exercise, may increase one's chance of getting meningitis, and lots of other illnesses.

Health care providers need to provide information and reasons to help students understand
their options. Perhaps the nurse did not educate your friend on why s/he should not drink after having received the meningitis vaccine, or your friend forgot or misunderstood the specific reasons. The American Nurses' Association code stresses the patient's right to self-determination? meaning making his or her own choices about his or her health care? and that begins with access to complete and comprehensive information. As an informed consumer, if a health care provider offers you advice or a prohibition in the future, you can certainly ask, "May I ask why?"; or, "Help me to understand what drinking could do..." Sometimes it's hard to ask questions when there is limited time or your provider seems like an unapproachable "authority figure." But remember, you are the consumer and it's your body? you have a right to be an active participant in your own care. You can check out the related Q&A below for the precepts of The Patients' Bill of Rights.

Alice!
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