Is it safe to consume alcohol when I use medications?

Alcohol (ethanol) and medications frequently don’t mix well together. The outcome is either a more intense (stronger) effect from the alcohol (central nervous system changes such as loss of coordination and vision changes), or more serious adverse effects from the medication(s). You should use alcohol with caution when you are taking medications. Moderation is a prudent precaution.

Are alcohol-medication interactions common?
Since the use of both alcohol and medications is common, one would assume that such interactions also are common. The risk and severity of the interactions depend on the overall consumption of alcohol and exposure over time. It appears that heavy alcohol consumption over an extended period of time is more likely to increase the risk of serious interactions, especially in older adults. Occasional consumption of smaller amounts is of less concern. It is important to realize that particular medications should not be combined with alcohol. If you need advice, talk to your doctor or check the drug’s package insert (see Chapter 3).

How do alcohol and medications interact?
Both may negatively affect your breathing and your ability to stay awake and alert. In addition, their effects are often additive. Alcohol affects your liver and its ability to break down medications, and it also may intensify or increase the effects of certain medications and cause adverse effects when they are used in combination.

Which medication effects may be intensified?
Many of the more potent pain relief medications, such as those containing morphine (MS Contin) or propoxyphene (Darvon), may depress breathing. This suppression can be enhanced by alcohol consumption. The combination of these and similar medications in regular doses with alcohol may lead to life-threatening depression of your breathing. Thus, alcohol should not be used in combination with these more potent pain relievers.

Similar effects may occur if alcohol is combined with some older types of sleeping pills such as barbiturates (secobarbital or Seconal). Medications
used for treatment of psychiatric conditions also may interact with alcohol. High doses of anabolic steroids, sometimes abused by athletes, may cause aggressiveness, and alcohol consumption may intensify this action. Finally, many antihistamines have a sedating effect that leads to tiredness/drowsiness, an effect that may be enhanced by alcohol.

For which medications may alcohol increase the risk of adverse effects?
Many medications prescribed for rheumatoid arthritis and other painful musculoskeletal conditions increase the risk of gastrointestinal (GI) bleeding or hemorrhage. Alcohol has the same adverse effect on the GI tract, and combined use may potentiate (strengthen) the tendency to bleed, which could become a problem during surgery and following accidents that lead to trauma. Acetylsalicylate (aspirin) and other painkillers -- for example, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (Motrin) and celecoxib (Celebrex) -- reduce the GI tract’s protective system against ulcers and hemorrhage and may cause ulcers. Alcohol can irritate the inner lining of the stomach, which also can lead to ulcers and hemorrhage. To reduce the risk of stomach ulcer and bleeding, don’t combine common painkillers and alcohol. To avoid liver damage, avoid combining high doses of acetaminophen-containing medications (like Tylenol) and alcohol.

Alcohol is a known vasodilator that causes your blood vessels to expand. This, in turn, can lead to a drop in blood pressure. Since many medications used to treat high blood pressure and angina pectoris (chest pain) exert their beneficial actions through vasodilation, combining these medications with alcohol may lead to an undesired drop in blood pressure.

What are the metabolic effects of alcohol?
The breakdown of alcohol is handled by the liver and may involve the same enzymes that metabolize certain drugs. Excessive alcohol consumption leading to liver damage may affect the breakdown of medications used to treat epilepsy, depression and anxiety.

By contrast, a few medications inhibit the breakdown of alcohol. One of those drugs is disulfiram (Antabuse), which has a breakdown product that causes flushing, headache and nausea. This medication is prescribed for the treatment of alcoholism. Other medications like metronidazole (Flagyl), used for treatment of various infections, have a mild Antabuse-like effect and should not be combined with alcohol.
Key messages

✓ The general rule: Consume alcohol in moderation when taking medications.
✓ Special caution with alcohol is advised when using potent painkillers, sleeping pills, and medications for psychiatric conditions and allergies.
✓ A precaution also is recommended for use of other painkillers containing acetylsalicylate (aspirin), nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), and acetaminophen.
✓ Before taking a new medication, find out whether it may interact with alcohol by asking your physician or pharmacist, or by reading the drug package insert.