



ALCOHOL AND HEALTH

ALCOHOL COMBINATIONS



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FOREWORD

Wine, beer, cider and spirits are part of everyday living in Quebec, commonly enjoyed by most people. More than eight in ten Quebecers aged 15 or older drink alcohol occasionally or regularly. The vast majority of them do so with balance and moderation.

People drink now and then, under particular circumstances. For example, they'll have a drink at the end of the day with friends on a sidewalk terrace.

At other times, alcohol is enjoyed in a pleasant combination with food, either during a meal or with snacks at happy hour. Such combinations are beneficial for various reasons that are explained in this publication.

Occasionally, however, people drink while consuming substances or engaging in activities which, in

combination with alcohol, can have harmful effects on their health. Such is the case with caffeine, tobacco, gambling, soft and hard drugs, and the energy drinks that have more recently appeared on the market.

This report is designed to be both comprehensive and readable. It covers substances and activities that, when combined with alcohol in moderation, present a minimal or negligible health risk. It also looks at the harmful effects of certain combinations of alcohol and tobacco or alcohol and drugs; and it examines the significantly more dangerous effects of alcohol and sedatives.

Ultimately, the report serves as a reminder that, even with low-risk combinations, moderation is always in good taste.



ALCOHOL COMBINATIONS

In Western culture, a drink after work is a pleasant way to mark the start of a well-deserved period of rest.¹ Drinking alcohol often indicates a break with routine and structured activity.² It is a symbolic pause³ that means it's time to relax!

In Quebec, surveys show that most people drink socially: at get-togethers with family and friends, during holidays and at celebratory events. Drinking is thus associated with socializing and fun.

Aside from alcohol, other substances—and behaviours—are also symbolic of relaxation and time out. Many people take breaks by eating a good meal, having a coffee or sipping

an energy drink. Still others gamble, smoke tobacco, or take soft or hard drugs to mark a break in routine.

Alcohol is often consumed in combination with these other products or activities.

Unfortunately, it is not always a happy marriage. When combined with certain substances, the specific properties of alcohol can produce a bad and occasionally dangerous mix.

Except in the case of food, there is always a risk involved when combining alcohol with other substances. Understanding the biological processes and other issues at stake can help people modify their behaviour appropriately.

¹ Cheung, Erickson, 1995.

² Gusfield, 1996.

³ SIRC, Oxford, 2000.

Green light	Orange light	Red light	Purple light
A happy combination	Pay attention	Look out!	Extreme danger

GREEN LIGHT: A HAPPY COMBINATION

Food is the only substance that has a beneficial effect on human health when combined with alcohol.

The presence of food in the gastrointestinal system has a positive effect on the absorption of alcohol by the blood. The type of food also makes a big difference. The fatter the food, the longer it takes for the alcohol to pass from the stomach to the intestine⁴ and the slower the absorption process, thus reducing the person's blood alcohol content.⁵

It is important to keep in mind that an elevated blood alcohol content (BAC) can have a harmful effect: a high BAC is often the cause of falls, fights and road accidents. On the other hand, the benefits of taking an extended break involving alcohol are not merely physiological! Pleasure is another important biological phenomenon produced when wine, cider or beer are sipped moderately, in combination with good food, and enjoyed in good company.

• ALCOHOL AND FOOD

Studies show that people who drink alcohol after eating a meal high in fat, protein and carbohydrate absorb the alcohol up to three times more slowly than those who drink on an empty stomach. Clearly, however, this does not mean we should all be eating high-calorie meals full of fat, protein and carbohydrate.

Pairing foods with wines enhances the enjoyment of both, to a degree that would be difficult to achieve if one were to eat the food and drink the wine separately. Combining the right food with the right wine also means considering the balance of flavours, the time of day, the season and the type of meal.

At cocktail time, beer, cider, whisky and other aperitifs should always be accompanied by snacks, such as nuts or cheese.

In studying alcohol and health, researchers should consider the context in which drinking occurs, since drinking with a meal can have certain health benefits.⁶ Many studies do, in fact, take this into account.

• ALCOHOL IN MIXED COCKTAILS

For the same reasons explained above regarding food, it is better to mix alcoholic cocktails with 100% natural pure fruit or vegetable juice, rather than carbonated or flavoured beverages that have minimal nutritional value.

If you absolutely must use a carbonated or flavoured mixer, it's better not to use "diet" versions, since sugar helps metabolize the alcohol. A number of studies⁷ show that, when cocktails are made with artificially sweetened beverages, as opposed to naturally sweetened ones, alcohol passes more quickly from the stomach to the blood, and alcohol levels in the blood and breath are higher.

⁴ The rate at which the stomach is able to transfer its contents into the intestine is called *gastric emptying*.

⁵ Blood alcohol content is the concentration of alcohol in the blood.

⁶ Butt et al., 2011.

⁷ Brickley et al., 2018; Marczinski and Stamatos, 2013; Wu, Chaikomin, Doran, Jones, Horowitz and Rayner, 2006.



ORANGE LIGHT: PAY ATTENTION

• ALCOHOL AND COFFEE

When consumed in moderate amounts, there is no danger in mixing alcohol and coffee. Drinking alcohol and coffee together, either separately or combined in one drink is not harmful in itself. In fact, in many cultures, it is a long-standing practice. After a meal, many people enjoy the way the combination brings out the flavours and aromas of both ingredients.

However, people often drink coffee with alcohol for other reasons, in particular when they have drunk too much alcohol and are hoping to mask the symptoms of intoxication.

What they're trying to do is use coffee to counter the negative effects of the alcohol, which has a sedative effect on the central nervous system and slows down the brain functions that affect judgement, emotion and behaviour. Coffee contains caffeine, a known stimulant, as well as chemical agents that stimulate the production of the hormones cortisone and adrenaline, which are also stimulants.⁸

Studies have demonstrated the antagonistic effects of caffeine and alcohol. Caffeine will slightly attenuate the effects of inebriation and allow a person to perform certain psychomotor tasks.⁹ That being said, drinking coffee after drinking alcohol in no way restores all the faculties necessary to drive a motor vehicle.¹⁰

In fact, the amount of coffee consumed has absolutely no effect on blood alcohol content.

People who drink coffee and alcohol, either together or sequentially, should remember that they are almost certainly underestimating their blood alcohol content. While the stimulating effects of the coffee may lessen some of the sedative effects of the alcohol, it is physiologically impossible for coffee to reduce blood alcohol content and render anyone sober. Only time can do that.

Vigilance is therefore called for when drinking alcohol with coffee, since the combination may have unpleasant consequences, particularly with regard to driving or other activities requiring full control of all faculties.

• ALCOHOL AND ENERGY DRINKS

In recent years, soft drinks have been losing market share to energy drinks, which people are drinking for the same reason they drink coffee, i.e. their stimulant effect.

While rumours that these drinks owe their kick to bull sperm or urine are merely urban legends, they do indeed contain taurine,¹¹ glucuronolactone¹² and about as much caffeine as there is in a cup of coffee, i.e. 80 mg.

But it's the way people drink them that makes energy drinks very different from coffee. Energy drinks are drunk cold and packaged for drinking quickly, which means the effects of the caffeine are felt much sooner than with coffee, which is generally served hot and sipped more slowly.¹³

⁸ Klag, Wang, Meoni et al., 2002.

⁹ Azcona, Barbanoj, Torrent, Jane, 1995; Hasenfrazt, Bunge, Dal Pra, Battig, 1993; Kerr, Sherwood, Hindmarch, 1991; Liguori, Robinson, 2001.

¹⁰ Howland, Rohsenow, Arnedt et al., 2011

¹¹ Taurine is an amino acid first isolated in ox bile, but produced synthetically for energy drinks.

¹² Glucuronolactone is a naturally occurring chemical compound produced by the metabolism of glucose in the liver.

¹³ Simon, Mosher, 2007.

Consumer characteristics and behavioural context

Young people are the biggest consumers of energy drinks. They have them mainly at parties and raves, in bars and at clubs. More than one third of 18 to 24 year-olds in Quebec (34%) say they drink energy drinks regularly.

Some North American studies and one Italian study¹⁴ show that mixing energy drinks with alcohol is very popular among students. In fact, it is common practice among one quarter to one half of them.

Users say that energy drinks help them “keep going.” As the director of communications of one brand notes, the drinks provide a boost of energy for people who like to go dancing and clubbing—all night long.¹⁵

These are precisely the type of circumstances in which young people tend to drink excessively.¹⁶ When young people mix alcohol with energy drinks, they are likely drinking a considerable amount. And that's what makes the combination dangerous.

False perceptions and increased risk-taking

Young people are more likely than adults to take risks and behave dangerously. They are more likely to be involved in road accidents, engage in unprotected, unplanned and or unwanted sex, behave violently or suffer from the violence of others, and attempt suicide. The sense of power and invulnerability that generally accompanies such behaviours can be further exaggerated when alcohol is combined with energy drinks.

One study¹⁷ compared people drinking alcohol only with those drinking alcohol mixed with energy drinks, and found

that the mix drinkers were far less likely to complain of headache, weakness and dry mouth, and decreased motor coordination.

And yet there was no significant difference between the two groups with regard to blood alcohol content or motor coordination and visual reaction speed, as objectively observed.

In other words, people who combine alcohol and energy drinks are definitely drunk and their faculties are impaired, but they don't feel the effects of intoxication. A couple of studies¹⁸ of cognitive performance and the perception of intoxication among social drinkers have reached the same conclusions.

Because these drinkers do not feel the effects of alcohol intoxication, the normal self-regulating mechanisms associated with drinking are no longer operational. A clear warning is therefore in order for young people who mix alcohol and energy drinks, since this particular combination further increases risky behaviour.

A study¹⁹ of 4,271 students at ten American universities showed that, compared to people who drank alcohol only, those who mixed alcohol with energy drinks were twice as likely to:

- hurt themselves or be injured;
- require medical attention;
- get into a vehicle with a drunk driver;
- assault someone sexually;
- be sexually abused.

Still, it is impossible to ascertain whether this is due to the combination of alcohol and energy drinks alone, or whether people who combine the two are more likely to put themselves in risky situations.

¹⁴ Brache and Stockwell, 2011; O'Brien et al., 2008; Oteri et al., 2007.

¹⁵ Wolfe, 2001.

¹⁶ Gliksman, Demers, Adlaf, Newton-Taylor, Schmidt, 2000.

¹⁷ Ferreira, de Mello, Pompeia, de Souza-Formigoni, 2006.

¹⁸ Marczinski and Fillmore, 2006; Marczinski et al., 2012.

¹⁹ O'Brien, McCoy, Rhodes, Wagoner, Wolfson, 2007.

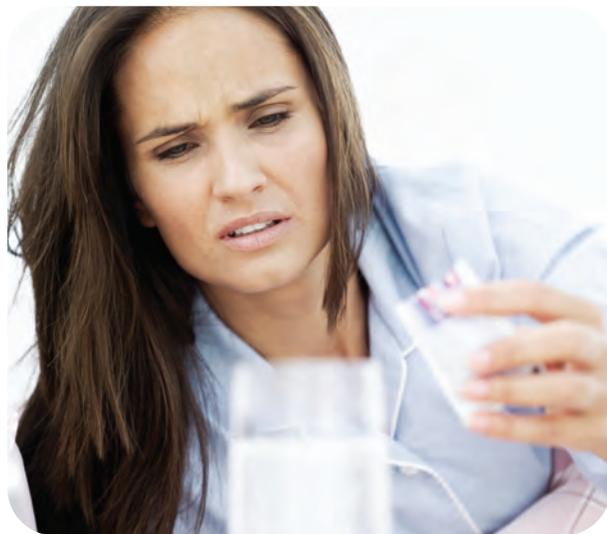




Impact on drinking

Given that people who mix alcohol with energy drinks often do so to mask the unpleasant taste of the alcohol, we can expect that such people will drink a greater amount more quickly and drink more on each occasion.²⁰

It has also been reported²¹ that people who mix alcohol with energy drinks tend to drink more than those who don't mix the two: about 5.8 drinks compared to 4.5. Similarly, the mixers report drinking an average maximum of 8.3 drinks per occasion, compared to 6.1 for the non-mixers. Mixers are also twice as likely to get drunk every week: 1.4 occasions, compared to 0.73 for the non-mixers.



²⁰ Ferreira, de Mello, Pompeia, de Souza-Formigoni, 2006.

²¹ O'Brien, McCoy, Rhodes, Wagoner, Wolfson, 2007.

Dehydration

An additional warning needs to be issued about the risk of dehydration when mixing alcohol and energy drinks. Caffeine and alcohol are diuretics, meaning they keep water from being reabsorbed by the kidneys and cause more water to be eliminated. This creates a chain reaction: the more alcohol you drink, the thirstier you feel. The real danger lies in continuing to drink alcohol—instead of water—which increases thirst and dehydration.

At parties and where people are dancing it also tends to get particularly warm, and the combination of alcohol and energy drinks further increases dehydration.

“Morning after” symptoms, such as headache, general discomfort and major fatigue, are all related to dehydration. During the party, energy drinks mask the symptoms of intoxication and temporarily quench thirst, but the next day, mixers should expect to feel worse than non-mixers.

WARNING!

People should be extremely careful when purchasing energy drinks, because some are already premixed with alcohol. As a result, those who have no intention of mixing alcohol with their energy drink may end up doing so inadvertently. Also, some companies that produce this new kind of alcoholic beverage are packaging them to look like the non-alcoholic versions. This can lead to confusion and mislead young people, their parents, and even employees working in stores where both types of energy drinks are sold.

• ALCOHOL AND GAMBLING

There is a two-way relationship between alcohol abuse and pathological gambling. There are more pathological gamblers among those who drink abusively than among the general population. Similarly, pathological gamblers are more likely to drink abusively than the general population.²²

Over the last decade or so, a number of studies have revealed more about the link between abusive drinking and pathological gambling. Thus far, the reasons for the connection have not been clearly identified, but both behaviours appear to have the same causes.

Abusive drinking and pathological gambling are both addictive behaviours that indicate a loss of control and involve obsessive thoughts about alcohol and gambling. Even when they are aware of the harmful consequences of their habits, addicts continue their abusive behaviour.

Among both alcohol abusers and pathological gamblers, changes can be observed in the brain centres responsible for pleasure and emotions.²³ Both behaviours are associated with a disturbance in the neurobiological mechanisms related to impulse control and reward.

Clinical studies have underscored the limits of genetic explanations and stressed the need to examine contextual factors as well. The comorbidity of alcohol abuse and pathological gambling are explained by the fact that abusive drinking disinhibits pathological gambling. People commonly gamble while drinking alcohol.²⁴

It is generally accepted that, when consumed beyond moderation, alcohol has a negative impact on cognitive

function. Alcohol impairs judgement and increases the tendency to take risks.²⁵ People with an elevated blood alcohol content are distracted from immediate and important concerns.²⁶

It is possible that, where gambling is concerned, even a small amount of alcohol can be harmful. In one experiment,²⁷ participants—all social drinkers—received either a placebo or a moderate dose of alcohol and then had to make gambling decisions. Compared to those who received the placebo, the group that received alcohol demonstrated an impaired ability to factor in the size of their winnings and the likelihood of winning when their losses were large.

People with a high blood alcohol content are thus less able to evaluate the real chance of winning and are less likely to remember past losses. These contextual explanations complement the observations of brain activity.

A definite causal connection between alcohol and pathological gambling cannot be made. Abusive drinking does not necessarily lead to pathological gambling; other studies have actually shown that pathological gambling causes abusive drinking. There is no ignoring the fact that, in some people, gambling has led to increased drinking, while in others the opposite is true.

Éduc'alcool feels compelled to issue a warning: people who enjoy gambling should avoid drinking alcohol at the same time. The combination of alcohol and gambling increases the risks of gambling inappropriately, i.e. pathologically.

²² Grant, Kushner, Kim, 2002.

²³ Blum, Sheridan, Wood, Braverman, Chen, Comings, 1995.

²⁴ Grant, Kushner, Kim, 2002.

²⁵ Weissenborn, Duka, 2003.

²⁶ Lane, Cherek, Pietras, Tcheremissine, 2004.

²⁷ George, Rogers, Duka, 2005.





RED LIGHT: LOOK OUT!

• ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO

Data on the general population reveal that smokers drink more than non-smokers; that drinkers smoke more than non-drinkers; that alcohol abuse is associated with heavy tobacco use; and that the vast majority of alcoholics smoke.²⁸ Alcohol and tobacco seem to make the “perfect” couple.

Three explanations have been offered regarding the correlation between drinking and smoking:²⁹

- Both have similar circumstantial risk factors, i.e. they are both associated with “time off.” Until just recently, they were the two main products found in locations where people relax and enjoy themselves, particularly where alcohol is available. Anyone who went for a drink was virtually guaranteed to be surrounded by smokers and the promotion of smoking.
- Drinking and smoking share the same genetic and psychiatric risk factors. Experiments on the subject³⁰ have been conducted on humans and laboratory rats, highlighting the common pathophysiological risk factors³¹ associated with the development of alcohol and nicotine dependence. This vulnerability—which is not genetic but results from early use—would explain why about 85% of alcoholics smoke, a rate four times higher than among the general population.
- The astonishing aspect of the alcohol-tobacco connection is the association between episodic drinking and occasional smoking. Many social or weekend smokers experience a sudden and acute craving for a cigarette when they are drinking excessively. Similarly, people who quit smoking often find themselves starting up again during a night of heavy drinking. Such phenomena are caused by the pharmacological interaction between alcohol and tobacco, and are characterized by an intense physical need to smoke.

²⁸ Zacny, 1990.
²⁹ O'Malley, 2006.

³⁰ Funk, Marinelli and Le, 2006; Hillemecher, Bayerlein, Wilhelm et al, 2006; Le, Li, Funk, Shram, Li, Shaham, 2006.

³¹ Pathophysiological risks are those associated with the functional changes that accompany a syndrome, disease or disorder.

In one study,³² 39 occasional smokers were administered three different doses of alcohol—a placebo, the equivalent of 2-3 drinks, and the equivalent of 4-5 drinks—at three different times, and a connection was observed between the amount of alcohol and the desire to smoke. Researchers noted that the higher their blood alcohol content, the more people craved a cigarette, and the more intensely they felt the craving. The study's authors concluded that, if occasional smokers experience the need to smoke when drinking heavily as opposed to moderately, it's not to combat the sedative effects of alcohol but because of the neuropsychological stimulation of the nicotine.

In another laboratory experiment,³³ researchers gave alcohol to heavy drinkers who smoke daily and then offered them a choice between a cigarette and a cash payment. Compared to participants who received a placebo, those who drank alcohol were significantly less likely to refuse the cigarette and, after smoking the first one, they smoked more cigarettes than the participants who were sober.

One study³⁴ demonstrated that drinking increases the intensity and value of the craving for a cigarette. Not only does alcohol increase the desire to smoke, but the very fact that people are drinking also increases the craving. In this experiment, even participants who had received the placebo exhibited a greater desire to smoke, although it was less pronounced than the craving felt by those who had actually received alcohol. In the presence of a lit cigarette, those who had drunk alcohol displayed more facial expressions associated with positive affect than the other participants.

In an experiment involving American university students,³⁵ 74% of smoking episodes occurred while participants were drinking alcohol. The opposite was also true. Anyone who, at any time, consumes both tobacco and alcohol should know that smoking can lead to drinking more.

And in yet another scientific study,³⁶ researchers hypothesized that nicotine slows gastric emptying, which would allow more alcohol to be metabolized in the stomach, leaving less to be absorbed by the small intestine. People who smoke tobacco and seek the intoxicating effects of alcohol would therefore have to consume a greater quantity of alcohol. This leads to increased production of acetaldehyde and more notable toxicity.



³² Epstein, Sher, Young, King, 2007.

³³ McKee, Krishnan-Sarin, Shi, Mase, O'Malley, 2006.

³⁴ Sayette, Martin, Wertz, Perrott, Peters, 2005.

³⁵ McKee, Hinson, Rounsaville, Petrelli, 2004.

³⁶ Parnell, West, Chen, 2006.



• ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

The combination of alcohol with drugs or illegally obtained medication is observed most commonly among problem users. In the general population, thrill-seekers and young people—who have a pronounced taste for new experiences—are most at risk for this dangerous mix.

Alcohol and drugs are generally combined to enhance the pleasurable effects of one or the other, or to diminish such unpleasant effects as anxiety or drowsiness.³⁷ Whatever the reason, the combination of alcohol and drugs creates a pharmacological interaction that can be extremely dangerous and even deadly.

One of the great dangers in combining alcohol and drugs is that the effects are impossible to predict.³⁸ So many factors can influence the results that it is not possible to consider both substances together with any accuracy. Among other things, the effects of the mix will depend on the mix itself, the dose, how it is administered, the order in which the substances are taken and the sociocultural circumstances, as well as the person's age, sex, weight, nutritional condition, physical health and psychological state.



³⁷ Ben Amar, 2007.
³⁸ Ben Amar, 2007.



• ALCOHOL AND MEDICATION

Some medications, in particular over-the-counter products like painkillers, may hinder the elimination of alcohol, increase or mask their effects, or cause unpredictable reactions. Conversely, alcohol can make medications less effective or interfere with their elimination. Anyone taking medication should be properly informed about contraindications before drinking alcohol at the same time. It is important to remember that, like alcohol, medications are eliminated by the liver, and as a general rule, it is better not to drink while taking medication.

• ALCOHOL AND CANNABIS

Cannabis use in Quebec is not uncommon. Currently, 11% of Quebecers aged 15 and older use cannabis, while 43% of Quebecers say they have tried it at least once.³⁹ It is impossible to know how many of these people combine it with alcohol, but a warning is in order for those who do.

Combining the two creates a synergy that increases the sedative effects of both the alcohol and the cannabis. Judgement, reaction time and coordination are obviously affected and driving is out of the question.

Because cannabis inhibits the part of the brainstem responsible for vomiting, combining it with alcohol can be particularly dangerous, and even deadly. When people drink too much and are in danger of alcohol poisoning, the body's natural response is to vomit. By inhibiting the vomit instinct, cannabis thus increases the danger of alcohol poisoning.

Furthermore, the body seems to handle the two substances differently, depending on the order in which they are consumed, as explained in the *Éduc'alcool* publication *Alcohol and cannabis: a very bad combination*.⁴⁰

³⁹ Statistics Canada, 2017.
⁴⁰ *Éduc'alcool*, 2019.

• ALCOHOL AND OTHER ILLICIT DRUGS

Only 2.5% of the general Quebec population use cocaine, speed, ecstasy and hallucinogenic drugs.⁴¹ A strong warning is in order against combining such narcotics, stimulants and hallucinogens with alcohol.

These combinations can cause the properties of one substance to suppress or attenuate the effects of the other. This can be extremely serious, as people may be unable to detect the impact of the substances they are taking. In other words, they may not feel as pronounced a “high” even though the physical effects of the drugs and alcohol on various organs and functions will be the same.⁴²

The combination of alcohol and stimulants can create an additive synergy that increases the risks of overdosing on either substance. For example, drinking alcohol with a stimulant like cocaine increases the speed with which alcohol spreads throughout the body, which means it reaches the brain more quickly. The result is a significant increase in blood alcohol content, as if the person had drunk very quickly.



⁴¹ Sawka and Munro, 2005.

⁴² Grant, Kushner and Kim (2002)



PURPLE LIGHT: EXTREME DANGER

All the various aggravating and attenuating factors notwithstanding, the most dangerous alcohol-drug combinations are those in which alcohol—which is a sedative—is combined with another sedative, such as a barbiturate, a benzodiazepine or an antihistamine. The sedatives sold by drug dealers include PCP (Mescaline, Mess, Horse, Angel Dust, TH) and ketamine (Special K, Vitamin K, Ket, Kitty).⁴³

When alcohol is combined with these psychotropic drugs, a mutually reinforcing synergy is created in which the combined sedative effect is greater than if the two substances were taken separately. Such combinations can severely depress the central nervous system, with consequences ranging from confusion to unconsciousness to death.⁴⁴

⁴³ RCMP/GRC, 2008.

⁴⁴ For more details about the effects of illicit drugs and the results of combining them with other substances, see the following websites:

- www.risq-cirasst.umontreal.ca
- www.toxquebec.com
- www.etape.qc.ca
- www.quebec.ca/en/health/advice-and-prevention/alcohol-drugs-gambling/
- www.nida.nih.gov
- www.niaaa.nih.gov

CONCLUSION

Combining alcohol with other substances is a common and fairly frequent practice. In the case of tobacco and drugs—neither of which can ever be condoned—alcohol is clearly contraindicated. No one should ever drink alcohol while taking other sedatives. And whenever medication is prescribed, people should always check with their pharmacist to find out whether alcohol is permitted or contraindicated.

When it comes to drinking alcohol with coffee, energy drinks or gambling, vigilance is called for. Such combinations are not necessarily harmful, but serious problems may arise if they are consumed or practiced to excess.

Drinking alcohol in combination with food is recommended and may even have a positive effect.

In short, our examination of the effects of combining alcohol with other substances and activities reminds us once again that when it comes to drinking, moderation is always in good taste!

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