MS and Alcohol: Is it Safe?

by DEBRA ROBERT

Do MS and Alcohol Mix?

This article was written by Abigail Budd and Debra Robert, who both discuss their own experiences with MS and alcohol.

Is drinking alcohol when you have Multiple Sclerosis (MS) ever a good idea? This is a question I skillfully avoid on a weekly basis as I don't want to know the answer!

I find it ironic that the very things we do to escape our problems can exacerbate them.

Drinking alcohol is one such thing; it is knit into the fabric of just about every society and social class known to man. We drink to relax, celebrate and socialize.

I like alcohol. I come from a "foodie" family (my brother owns a string of restaurants) and have grown up appreciating good food and wine. I like going to restaurants and wine tastings and belong to wine clubs where cases are delivered to my house every few months.

I do notice changes within me though, even with a relatively small amount. My mobility gets worse so going to the bathroom is harder.

Now, I wouldn't dream of drinking too much at a restaurant because I would never make it as my bladder function is affected by alcohol–I feel the need to go even more often than usual.

What's happening to my body to make things worse then?

How Alcohol Affects Your Body and Health With MS

Moderate drinking for the average adult breaks down to nine drinks per week for women, 14 for men. One drink is measured as 12oz. of beer, 5oz. of wine or 1.5oz. of liquor.

As MSers, we must keep in mind that we are not in 'the average adult' category when it comes to having a few drinks. We need to consider the role MS plays when consuming alcohol.

Check with your doctor about safe drinking limits for your particular case. I learned the hard way that MS and alcohol don't always mix.

Central Nervous System

Alcohol is a depressant. It depresses the central nervous system which can cause symptoms of MS to feel worse such as bladder control, speech and mobility difficulties.

I experience this but feel if I don’t drink too much the effects will wear off and I’ll be okay the next day. I tell myself there’ll be no lasting damage as long as I’m strict with myself.

Immune System

Excessive alcohol consumption attacks some white blood cells we produce which can have a knock-on effect on how our bodies deal with germs. MS already compromises our immune system, so this needs to be a consideration.

Medication

Some medication doesn’t mix well with alcohol, so it’s important to check this out with your health care team. I take codeine for pain sometimes, and it’s not a good idea to mix this with alcohol.

We also need to be aware of the extra strain alcohol and medication can take on our liver function, and I always have at least four alcohol-free days a week to let my liver recover.

Bladder Issues

Alcohol is a diuretic so can cause us to need the bathroom more than we usually do. This is always fun for a MSer, especially when poor mobility is also a factor. We also should think about the extra strain this puts on those around us.

I’d had a few glasses of wine this weekend and was fine getting to the toilet but needed help getting back to my scooter afterward. My husband had to help me, so this put a strain on his poor back so was I just being selfish?

Sleep

Alcohol disrupts sleep which can have an impact on fatigue the following day. I nearly always wake in the night when I’ve had a few glasses of wine and then find it difficult to get back to sleep.

This is ok if there’s not a lot going on the following day and can often force me to rest but I wouldn’t be able to function if I had to work.

Depression

Excessive alcohol consumption can also impact our mental health and can cause depression. MS can also cause these symptoms, so drinking won’t help our long-term well-being and ability to cope.

Relapses

There doesn’t seem to be any evidence that alcohol causes MS relapses and some studies have even shown it can be beneficial.

WebMD, for example, states, “A study by the Institute of Environmental Medicine in Sweden shows drinking could lower your risk of multiple sclerosis. The reason? Alcohol reduces inflammation in the body and MS is an "inflammatory" disease.” So, there is some good news!

Developing Alcohol Problems

In my professional opinion, having worked with substance abuse for some years, some people will be at higher risk of developing alcohol problems depending on their reasons for drinking.

Those who are trying to escape something will develop a greater psychological dependence.

If you use alcohol as a crutch to help you cope it could suck you in and leave you unable to stop. Talk with your doctor about alcohol consumption and how to quit drinking.

Next page: Read more about our writers' experiences with MS and alcohol.

Debra's Story About MS and Alcohol

My biggest give to date was hanging up my car keys for the last time. I am an independent spirit, and I love driving. I've driven a stick shift all my life and owned a nice little Ninja 250 motorcycle.

I savored the times I spent riding alongside the ocean or across the state where the star-filled night sky was uninterrupted by city lights.

A year or so back, I started to make poor choices in judgment while driving. I was scaring myself with close calls and hesitations. I found myself to be in a state of confusion at the wheel.

I tried to ignore the realization that highway speed now scared the heck out of me. Admittedly, I was becoming a danger not only to myself but others around me. My neurologist agreed — I no longer had the cognitive ability to judge space and navigate at high speeds.

I voluntarily gave up driving. I became depressed over having this part of life taken away from me. I sought out some consolation — few drinks at night seemed to do the trick.

It dulled the self-absorbed pain I was in. With a drink or two, I could forget, at least for a while, that MS was not going away.

The Reality

My doctor informed me that one medication I was prescribed was interacting horribly with my increased alcohol intake. The cravings and increased side effects I experienced were attributed to this bad combination.

I had been diagnosed with a spastic bladder months ago. Alcohol is a diuretic. I didn't need to be a rocket scientist to put two and two together once I pulled my head out of the sand.

MSers are susceptible to depression. Alcohol is a depressant. It is no wonder I was spiraling down into an unhealthy place.

The Fix

I can certainly say drinking became a very unhealthy habit. I look back at my choices now, and I am floored at how I just ignored the obvious.

I was causing harm because I never checked with a doctor and I never considered the consequences of my actions. I decided to stop drinking altogether to re-evaluate my situation.

I sought out quieter, simpler environments for a while. I began to stretch and exercise more. I made time to watch movies and treated myself to a few minor indulgences like a great cup of coffee or time spent tending my garden.

I would no longer fly off haphazardly to avoid my situation. I gave myself a break — I was good to myself.

Libation, Celebration — or Medication

With MS, we need to remain keenly aware of our choices and what their consequences might be. I no longer drink

for any reason other than for life’s celebrations.

When offered a glass of spirits, I think before I drink. I draw the line and limit sensibly. I drink plenty of water. I stay in control of my faculties.

Checking in with myself whenever I consider having a drink has kept me on a very healthy, happy path. Reflect and think for yourself how you feel once the party is over.

With the right information and a clear head, I eventually took control. Luckily, I stopped before I damaged my health or compromised the well-being of others. Just like I put the car keys away, I stopped excessive drinking.

Silver Lining

My car keys remain hung on the hook by the front door. They are no longer a sad reminder of lost independence and enjoyment — they have become a symbol for choosing right action.

We all steer our ships when it comes to MS. We will hit some storms and choppy weather along the way. If we remain vigilant and balanced and take care of ourselves both physically and spiritually, we can get through just about anything.