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Methanol poisoning and local herbal brews during travel

Stay safe while enjoying drinks overseas by following our travel health advice

Travel abroad can be a time when people relax and may increase their risk-taking behaviour, including drinking more alcohol than normal. Traveller deaths and serious illness caused by drinks contaminated with industrial alcohol (methanol) have been reported [1, 2]. Travellers have also become seriously unwell after taking part in ceremonies involving drinking local brews containing hallucinogenic drugs [3].

As well as having its own physical health effects, excessive alcohol can increase other risk-taking behaviours and reduce inhibitions. Accidents, including drowning, road traffic accidents and falls, are more common because of the way alcohol affects personal judgement, decision making, balance and co-ordination [4, 5].

The spiking of drinks with large amounts of alcohol and/or prescription/illegal drugs is a potential hazard both at home and abroad. Drinks are spiked for many reasons, but often because it makes committing crimes, such as sexual assault or theft, easier [6].

Methanol poisoning

Methanol is a clear, colourless, flammable liquid alcohol made from distilling wood. It is used in many commercial products, like antifreeze, fuel and paint thinners. It is not meant for human consumption [7].

Methanol has been used in the manufacture of fake (counterfeit) replicas of well-known alcohol brands like vodka or illegal local spirits/'bootleg alcohol'.

Drinking methanol, even in very small amounts, is extremely dangerous and can cause coma, convulsions, blindness, nervous system damage and death. Symptoms are often delayed for 12-24 hours and occasionally up to 48 hours [8].

Ayahuasca ceremonies

Ayahuasca ceremonies are traditional 'spiritual cleansing' rituals that involve drinking a brew made from local plants. This brew contains a drug called dimethyltryptamine (DMT a class A substance in the UK) that can cause hallucinations. Travellers visiting South America sometimes join these ceremonies or visit retreats to experience the ritual. This drug's effects can be unpredictable, especially for anyone with mental health issues [9].

Ayahuasca's interaction with existing medical conditions is not well understood, but it can raise blood pressure and heart rate, so can be harmful for anyone with a pre-existing heart condition [9]. People have suffered serious illnesses and have sometimes died after drinking it. Some Ayahuasca retreats are in remote areas, making it difficult to get medical help [10].

Kava ceremonies

In some South Pacific islands, a traditional drink called Kava is used in ceremonies and is sometimes offered in bars and hotels [11, 12]. Kava has been associated with liver toxicity, including fatal liver failure, and has been illegal in the UK since 2003 [13].

Advice for travellers

Before you travel

Check [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office \(FCDO\)](#) website for warnings and safety advice when planning a trip and before/during travel.

While you are away

Drink alcohol responsibly and avoid 'binge drinking'.

Never drive, operate machinery or swim whilst drinking or under the influence of drugs.

Protect yourself from methanol poisoning:

- Always buy alcohol from licensed bars, hotels and liquor stores. Avoid homemade alcoholic drinks like rice wine or palm liquor [14].
- Take extreme care when buying spirit-based drinks.
- Bottles may appear genuine when they're not; labels may not be accurate. If the price of alcohol looks too good to be true, it probably is.
- Check branded products; do not buy bottles/cans with poorly printed labels or with spelling mistakes/typographical errors.
- Check bottle seals are intact.
- Never accept free 'shots' of spirit.
- Never leave a drink unattended. Only accept drinks from people you know and trust.
- Get urgent medical attention if you (or anyone you are travelling with) shows signs of alcohol-induced methanol poisoning or drink-spiking.
- See '[Know what is in your drink?](#)' for more information about methanol poisoning.

Advice for health professionals

Encourage travellers to think ahead and make plans about their safety while abroad and signpost them to our [Personal safety factsheet](#).

Resources

- [Methanol poisoning - MSF](#)
- [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office](#)

References

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