

When Foods and Drugs Clash

by Roban Johnson

If you enjoy a glass of grapefruit juice with your morning breakfast, be aware that it may interfere with some of the medicine you take. This citrus juice contains a substance that affects the liver's ability to metabolize a number of different drugs. The result is a build-up of the medication in your body—in effect, an overdose.

William N. Kelly, Pharm.D., professor of pharmacy administration at Mercer's Southern School of Pharmacy, says grapefruit juice can be a real problem for people taking calcium channel blockers, like Procardia, Plendil, Baypress and Sular. "Too much of one of these drugs in your system could lower your blood pressure dramatically," he said. "It may also affect the rhythm of your heart."

Other medications that interact negatively with grapefruit juice are cholesterol-lowering drugs, such as Lipitor, Mevacor and Zocor; antibiotics such as erythromycin and the anti-depressant, Prozac. "Grapefruit juice can also negatively interact with some antihistamines, although the newer non-sedating medications, like Claritin, Allegra and Zyrtec, should not be affected," said Kelly.

He also recommends caution when mixing prescription medications with over-the-counter vitamins and supplements. "If you take blood thinners, such as warfarin (Coumadin), you should stay away from vitamin K, which counteracts the effect of the drug," Kelly said. "Mixing vitamin K with anti-coagulants may actually cause your blood to clot. These clots can block arteries—especially in your fingers, toes and legs, causing thrombophlebitis—and can also lodge in your brain and cause a stroke." Vitamin K is found in many foods, including asparagus, cabbage, broccoli, lettuce, turnip greens and spinach, as well as beef liver, green tea, and tomatoes.

The herbal supplement ginkgo also can interact with blood thinners, including warfarin, aspirin and heparin, causing internal bleeding and nosebleeds.

Another herbal product that can be dangerous when mixed with some prescription medications is hawthorn. "Some people use hawthorn to decrease angina, or heart

pain," Kelly said. "If you take hawthorn, and also take the prescription heart medication digoxin, or Lanoxin, the combination can depress your heart rate so much it may stop beating."

Kelly also warns against taking Viagra if you are on nitroglycerin or other nitrate-containing medications used to treat angina and coronary artery disease. "If you mix Viagra with these medications, you can die," he said. "This is a lethal drug interaction."

To safeguard against drug misadventures, tell your health care providers about the medications, vitamins and supplements you take. "That includes oral contraceptives, herbal products and every other over-the-counter product you use," advised Kim Yaughn, Pharm.D., C.D.M., clinical pharmacist at The Medicine Shoppe in Macon.

Yaughn and Kelly suggest you take all of your medicine bottles with you when you see a doctor, and share them with your pharmacist on a regular basis.

"Don't let a physician or pharmacist prescribe or dispense a medication without you knowing what it is and why you, or your family member, are supposed to take it," Kelly said. "By being informed, you can help prevent unnecessary and potentially deadly drug interactions." ♦

RESOURCES

- FDA food and drug interactions can be found at www.cfsan.fda.gov/~lrd/fdinter.html
- Dr. Koop.com Drug Checker can be found at www.drkoop.com/hcr/drugstore/drugchecker/drugchecker-popup.asp

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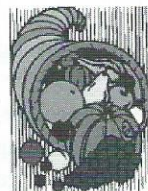
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