

Can You Take Ambien and Hydrocodone Together?

These two powerful drugs can be deadly when mixed. Here's what you need to know.

by **Barbara Brody** Health Writer

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YOU'VE BEEN HAVING trouble sleeping and your back/knee/other achy body part is really hurting. Can you pop an Ambien and hydrocodone at the same time? What about in the same day? While combining the two drugs might seem like a reasonable plan, it's actually pretty dangerous, because both can make you sleepy and suppress your ability to breathe properly.

"The combination of hydrocodone and Ambien would be classified as a major interaction," says [Danielle Fixen, Pharm.D.](#), an associate professor at Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora, CO. "Both of these medications can cause [central nervous system] [depression](#), increasing the risk of sedation, driving impairment, psychomotor function, and falls, especially in older adults." Put these drugs together and the risks become magnified, and possibly even deadly.

What Is Ambien?

Ambien (zolpidem) is an insomnia treatment in the [sedative-hypnotic class](#) that works by slowing down brain activity. Although it certainly helps many people who struggle with [insomnia](#) get some rest, [Ambien](#) also comes with a long list of potential side effects. These may include:

- Dizziness
- Headache
- Heartburn
- Unusual dreams

Ambien also leaves some people feeling extra foggy and sleepy the next day, which means that activities like driving could be problematic. And, it has the potential to mess with your recall and cause an amnesia-like effect, says [Stephen Ferrara, D.N.P.](#), president-elect of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners and associate dean of clinical affairs at Columbia University School of Nursing in New York City. "Some people will have a full conversation [during the night] or go into the kitchen and have a full meal and not remember it," he says.

What Is Hydrocodone?

[Hydrocodone](#) is a powerful pain reliever in the opioid class. It's perhaps best known by the brand name Vicodin, which is actually a combination of hydrocodone and acetaminophen (Tylenol). Hydrocodone is also found in [numerous other prescription products](#), including Lorcet (another hydrocodone-acetaminophen combo), Ibudone (hydrocodone and ibuprofen), Kwelcof (hydrocodone and guaifenesin, a drug for chest congestion), and many others.

Hydrocodone is used for major pain that can't be controlled with other, less potent, pain relievers. You might be given it after a car accident or surgery (including oral surgery). Some people with chronic pain conditions, such as [fibromyalgia](#) or [inflammatory arthritis](#) (like [rheumatoid arthritis](#)), also rely on it.

Hydrocodone and other drugs in the opioid class have side effects such as:

- Constipation
- Itchiness
- Nausea

Two bigger concerns are that these drugs can:

- Carry the potential for addiction
- Make you seriously sleepy and confused

These effects are especially seen when opioids are used for an extended period. But in some people, the slide toward opioid misuse and addiction can start after just a few days, reports the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#). That's why you might be given just a few pills to take after a procedure or accident, rather than a whole bottle.

Why Mixing Ambien and Hydrocodone Is Dangerous

Pain and sleep problems often overlap, but you should never combine an opioid like hydrocodone and a sleeping pill like Ambien, says [Douglas Paauw, M.D.](#), professor of medicine and chair of patient-centered clinical education at the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle. "If you're on an opioid, that should be your sleep aid. It should sedate you. Please don't take your sleep medication," even if you normally take a drug like Ambien before bed, he says.

Why? Because taking an opioid like hydrocodone with a sleep aid means that you're stacking two sedating drugs on top of each other. As a result, the sedating effect lingers, so you're more apt to fall asleep while driving or have another type of serious accident the next day. The combination of these drugs may also cause respiratory depression, meaning you take fewer breaths per minute and don't get enough oxygen, which could prove fatal.

Unfortunately, many people end up taking these drugs together without really thinking about it, warns Dr. Paauw. It's not unusual for people to have extra doses of these drugs in their homes months or years after being given a prescription, he notes, which means you might remember on a restless night that you have a helpful sleep aid in the back of your medicine cabinet and not consider the fact that you're on hydrocodone because you broke your arm.

Even worse, he says, is adding alcohol to the mix. You should not take Ambien with alcohol, and you should not take hydrocodone with alcohol either. But put all three together and you really have a problem. Alcohol also causes sleepiness and confusion and causes some respiratory depression. A moderate dose of any one of these drugs alone might not be a big problem as far as breathing is concerned but put them together and they can absolutely be fatal, says Dr. Paauw.

Someone who is in respiratory distress will be taking slow and shallow breaths, and their lips or fingertips might look bluish (a sign of lack of oxygen). They might seem confused, disoriented, or be difficult to wake up. Some vomit or have seizures. Be aware that this is a medical emergency and requires immediate attention, so call 911. Left untreated, the person could stop breathing entirely or their heart could stop, says Ferrara.

Other Drugs That Interact With Ambien and Hydrocodone

Ambien and hydrocodone are a bad combination. But you should also know that each of these drugs also interacts with many other medications. [Among other drugs](#), Ambien should not be combined with:

- Alcohol
- Any other sleep medications or tranquilizers such as benzodiazepines
- Barbituates
- Ciproflaxin
- Opioids

[Among other drugs](#), hydrocodone should not be combined with

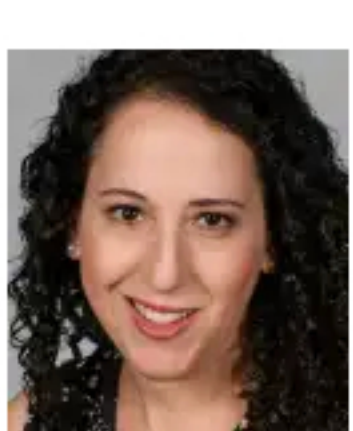
- Alcohol
- Any other opioids
- Any sleep aids
- Clotrimazole
- Erythromycin
- Gabapentin

Before combining any medications, check with your doctor or a pharmacist, or at least consult an online [drug interaction checker](#).

Sleeping Well Without Ambien

If you must take an opioid like hydrocodone, do not take Ambien or another drug designed to induce sleep. Hydrocodone alone should sedate you, and practicing good [sleep hygiene](#)—such as going to bed and waking up at the same time daily, and avoiding caffeine for several hours before sleep—may also help, says Ferrara. If you're still struggling to get to sleep, talk to your doctor.

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Barbara Brody is a New York-based writer and editor who specializes in health and wellness. A former national magazine editor, she's an expert in translating medical topics into stories that everyone can understand and enjoy... [more](#)