

Alcohol and Halal, how much is allowed?

From the Holy Quran 5:90 - O you who believe, intoxicants, and gambling, and the altars of idols, and the games of chance are abominations of the devil; you shall avoid them, that you may succeed.

The prophet Mohamed S.A.W said: "Whatever intoxicates in large quantities, then a small quantity of it is forbidden." [Related by al-Tirmidhî and Ahmad with an authentic chain of transmission]

There's no doubt that all intoxicating alcohol (which includes beer, spirits, wines etc.) are strictly prohibited in Islam and thus for any product to be considered Halal, it must not contain alcohol of any kind. Thus any food made with alcoholic drink (such as wine) is Haram. In contrast, not many people know that alcohol is also present in certain types of Halal food such as bread and soy sauce. These food are Halal because the alcohol present are in minute quantities due to natural reaction between certain chemicals during the manufacturing process (not purposely added) thus Halal by nature.

Does it imply that even minute quantities of alcohol used will render the product Haram? If not, what's the minimum quantity? In the commercial food industry, alcohol is the second most common solvent after water. Alcohol is used as a "carrier" for food colourings and flavours and usually accounts for less than 2 to 3 parts per thousand (0.02% to 0.03%) in the final product. Although ethyl alcohol is Haram, if it's not from dates and grapes extract, then it's permissible if it does not intoxicate. Rasulullah S.A.W. said: "Khamr (wine) is from these 2 trees, dates and grapes." (Mishkat p. 317)

According to the ruling of Ibn Taymmiah in his Fatwa (21/502) and upon recommendations of the 9th Medical Fiqh Seminar of the Islamic Medical Science Organization as per meeting in Aldar Albayda in Morocco in June 1987, tiny amounts of prohibited Haram substances that are not discernible to the unaided human senses are permitted for use without altering the Halal status of the products produced. The Islamic Food & Nutrition Council of America (IFANCA) states that food items and ingredients with less than 0.1% and 0.5% alcohol level respectively are considered Halal.

Not all alcohol are Haram though. Other forms of alcohol such as stearyl alcohol are not intoxicating. Although not used in any food manufacturing process due to its poisonous nature, they are used in other products such as medicines and mouthwashes. Medicines that contain alcohol should be refrained unless no suitable replacements are found.