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Is Alcohol Killing Your Workout?

Health by Barbara Brody on 8/28/2014



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You're smart enough to know that regularly downing a six-pack of beer will mess with your efforts to carve out six-pack abs. But how bad is a little booze, really?

While moderate alcohol consumption — usually defined as no more than one drink per day for women and two for men — has been linked to a [reduced risk of heart disease](#), it has also been tied to a number of health problems. Women who have a mere three adult beverages per week, for example, are more likely to develop [breast cancer](#) than those who abstain.

Disease risks aside, there are other reasons to be cautious — especially if you're an avid exerciser.

Sip on This

You may have heard that alcohol is packed with empty calories, which is true. You might also understand that it slows your reflexes and reaction time, which is why jogging while tipsy (a specialty of the [Hash House Harriers](#), "a drinking club with a running problem") isn't the smartest idea. But you probably don't realize that imbibing can impact your [athletic performance](#) even if you haven't had a sip for days.

Although it takes the average person about 90 minutes to metabolize one standard libation (12 ounces of beer, five ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of hard liquor), the effects can linger in your system for much longer, says David Spinner, D.O., a physical rehabilitation specialist at [The Mount Sinai Hospital](#). In fact, research has shown that athletes who consume alcohol at least once a week are more than [twice as likely](#) as non-drinkers to get injured. Researchers attribute this in part to the "hangover effect," which has been shown to reduce sports performance by up to 11 percent.

Frequently raising a glass also makes it harder to tone your body. "When you work out, you damage muscle and then rebuild it so it becomes [bigger and stronger](#), but alcohol inhibits that process," says Spinner. Plus it [disrupts normal sleep](#), and snooze time is when your body produces human growth hormone (HGH), which is needed for building and maintaining muscle mass, says [Barbara Lewin](#), R.D., a Florida-based sports nutritionist who counsels Olympic and professional athletes.

Another issue is that alcohol is a diuretic and being [dehydrated](#) will certainly interfere with your speed and endurance. "If you go out drinking on a Saturday night and then wake up Sunday and go for a long run, you can expect about a 10 to 12 percent decrease in aerobic performance," says Spinner.

Lewin also points to dehydration, and says marathoners would be wise to avoid the post-race cocktail tents, despite the [recent study](#) stating that beer could be beneficial post-workout and can be a good source for hydration. Lewin notes that in the study light beer was the healthier option over the regular beer and adding salt was always better than having no salt at all. She believes that no matter what, alcohol will compromise recovery — it just depends how much and what's at risk. "That's the time when you want to rehydrate and replace your muscle glycogen stores by [consuming carbohydrates](#) and beer isn't the best source," she explains.

Here's the Chaser

So does being serious about your workouts mean you have to completely swear off the liquor cabinet? In a perfect world that would be ideal, but Spinner admits it's not realistic for most people. In general, he suggests limiting consumption as much as possible and taking in plenty of water, as well as waiting several days between the occasional night of partying and resuming any [intense exercise](#).

When prepping for a competitive event (like a marathon or triathlon), however, Spinner says it's best to cut out all alcohol two weeks beforehand. And if you can't resist [grabbing a beer](#) after crossing that finish line, Lewin will give you a pass — as long as you also drink lots of H2O or sports drinks and eat some high-carb snacks so you can start to refuel properly.

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