

Health & Fitness Tips

Alcohol - One for the Road

Drinking in moderation is the key to maintaining or improving your running, says SQNLDR Belinda Ball.



Can you believe that in the early 1900s, marathon runners were given brandy during races? Thanks to scientific research, runners are now given water, sports drinks, carbohydrate gels, and sports bars to enhance performance.

These days, alcohol is a prominent part of the social scene for many people, runners and non-runners alike. Alcohol consumed in moderation can be a pleasant way to unwind and relax. But before you pop that cork, get clued up on the facts about alcohol.

Alcohol, if you didn't know already, is high in kilojoules - one standard drink will provide 300kj to 450kj, so it can cause weight gain.

Remember too, that most drinks served are not a standard drink. You are likely to be consuming from one-and-a-half to two standard drinks in one glass.

The kilojoules in alcoholic drinks come from alcohol (29kj per gram), not carbohydrate as commonly thought. When alcohol enters the bloodstream, it is used up as energy before fat, protein and carbohydrate.

It is not stored as fat in the body, as many people believe, but it greatly contributes to daily energy intake.

Alcohol in the bloodstream can prevent fat from being burnt up as energy, so fat consumed in the diet is more likely to be stored.

The only way to avoid gaining weight from excessive alcohol consumption is to reduce your intake of kilojoules from other foods and drinks.

This is generally not a good idea, because it may lead to deficiencies of vital nutrients, including vitamins and minerals.

Say when ...

So, how much alcohol is safe? The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends that men should have no more than four standard drinks a day, and women no more than two.

You should also have at least two alcohol-free days in a week. Remember though, that these guidelines refer to the harmful effects of excess alcohol consumption, not the amount that can be consumed before you gain weight.

These guidelines assume that you are not taking any medication, are not pregnant or planning a pregnancy, do not have liver disease, or any condition that is exacerbated by drinking alcohol, and are not intending to drive or about to do anything involving risk.

The liver can process just under one standard drink per hour (that's about seven grams of alcohol). No amount of cold air, showers, water, coffee, or exercise can speed up this process.

Women tend to become intoxicated more rapidly than men, because they usually have less lean body mass (having more muscle assists with alcohol tolerance).

They also have a smaller liver. Also, women tend to eat less than men, and hence have less food in their system, so alcohol can more be more quickly absorbed into the blood.

Some research also shows that women who are pre-menstrual or ovulating tend to become intoxicated more easily, indicating that hormone levels also play a role.

Carbonated alcoholic drinks, or spirits mixed with fizzy drinks can also affect how fast alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream.

The good news

Yes, there is some. You will have heard that red wine can do wonders for the heart.

The research behind the claim shows that red wine may increase levels of HDL (good) cholesterol in the bloodstream. In addition, red wine is a rich source of antioxidants. If consumed at the rate of one-to-two glasses per day, this may help to prevent heart disease, and some forms of cancer.

Non drinkers out can obtain a nice antioxidant boost from a variety of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Too much hurts

While there are positive benefits of alcohol, there are some very negative ones that accompany excessive consumption.

- Alcohol can affect the brain, causing mood and personality changes, as well as memory loss, impaired concentration and an inability to learn. The constant stress on the liver to process alcohol can also lead to liver damage and cirrhosis.
- Alcohol can lead to dehydration, especially if you don't drink something non alcoholic at the same time. And as a runner you don't want to be dehydrated at any time.
- Alcohol dilates blood vessels, so if you drink a lot when you are injured, swelling may increase in the affected area. This is in contrary to the standard and well-known practice of reducing blood flow to the area by RICE (rest, ice, compression and elevation).

And here's the biggest warning for runners: alcohol can affect the resynthesis of glycogen following exercise. So if you choose to have alcohol after you have gone for a run, make sure you rehydrate and consume carbohydrate rich foods or fluids first.

Alcohol and exercise

There have been some interesting studies done on the effects of excess alcohol consumption and athletic performance.

After a person has consumed enough alcohol in one hour to meet the legal limit for driving, there is decreased contraction of the heart and a slower respiratory rate.

This means that less blood and oxygen is delivered to the rest of the body - hardly beneficial to a runner. In a sport setting, excess alcohol can affect hand and eye

coordination, reaction time, balance, muscle and cardiovascular endurance, speed, power and strength.

And remember, these effects can still be around the morning after a night of moderate drinking.

Alcohol can also disrupt sleep, leaving you groggy when you need to be fresh for the morning run.

But most important to running performance, alcohol hampers your body's ability to recover from a workout, because the liver, which processes alcohol, is also responsible for replenishing spent glycogen stores.

It can't do both at once, so it concentrates on clearing the alcohol from your system and leaves your glycogen stores depleted. So you're best off not having that post-race celebratory drink if it contains alcohol.

Safe drinking

Below are some tips to ensure that you can still enjoy a regular glass of alcohol, but keep yourself in good condition at the same time. " Only consume the alcohol amount recommended as safe.

- Quench your thirst with water or another non-alcoholic drink.
- Have a non-alcoholic drink (preferably water) for every alcoholic drink to reduce both the chance of dehydration, as well as the total amount of alcohol consumed
- Don't drink alcohol if you are injured.
- Make sure you eat before and while you're drinking.
- Do not drink and then drive, swim or operate any form of machinery.
- Have a mate look out for you (perhaps the designated driver) and listen to them when they tell you that you have had enough.
- Do not allow your wine glass to be topped up when still half full. Wait until it is finished first, so you can gauge how much you are drinking.