



Exercise and Alcohol

Many people enjoy a drink or two to relax and unwind, or when out socialising.

Statistics show that in 2013/14, 80% of New Zealanders aged 15-years or more were drinking alcohol on a regular basis. While a drink or two is unlikely to do harm to your fitness levels, and has been shown in some research to have a beneficial health impact, over consumption may have a negative effect on both your exercise session post drinking, and on your exercise and fitness gains in the medium to long term. There are also long term health consequences for the 20% of New Zealanders who report a potentially hazardous alcohol consumption pattern.

The often referred to health benefits of alcohol consumption relate to the reduction in the risk of developing heart disease, with research indicating there may be some reduction in the risk of stroke and type 2 diabetes as well. Before you refill your glass, it's worth noting that these health benefits are gained with low consumption levels, do not extend to all drinkers, and the overall impact can be small or even non-existent in some cases. The good news is that there are other things we can do that have a higher success rate in reducing our health risks than that glass of wine, including exercise, so if the choice is late night drinking, or an early morning workout, then there's a clear winner. It's worth noting that heavy drinking episodes can increase the risk of heart disease even if you are a low to moderate drinker regularly. The current health recommendations are to limit consumption to 2 standard drinks a day for women and 3 standard drinks for men with at least 2 alcohol free nights a week; plenty of room to indulge without upsetting your health or exercise schedule.

The acute effects of alcohol on exercise performance mean that not too many people try and combine the two. You will find that you are less coordinated, your power decreases and your eye hand coordination is compromised. For most people the impact is felt the following day; a late night out may mean that the idea of an early workout loses its charm, and there's a couple of reasons for this, beyond the lack of sleep. Too much alcohol can slow down the absorption of water and increase urine output, which will both lead to dehydration and reduction in coordination, and overall performance.

There is a silver lining though. While a hangover will reduce your output and exercise performance, the impact wears off as your hangover does. The worst case scenario in the long term as a result of regular and excessive drinking is varying degrees of muscle damage and weakness. Not great for reaching your exercise and health goals.

If maintaining a healthy weight is one of your goals, then alcohol consumption will have to be counted as part of your energy intake, and while it has a low nutritional value, a gram of alcohol contains 7 calories, second only to fat (at 9 calories). Most drinkers also report additional calories consumed along with alcohol.

At the end of the day it's common sense, you can have the best of both; relaxing with a drink, and keeping a regular exercise routine. It's a matter of balance and moderation.

References:

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Who is the NZ Register of Exercise Professionals (REPs)?

REPs is an independent non profit organisation administrating the New Zealand exercise professionals register to ensure that the public receive safe and effective exercise advice.

Using REPs Registered Exercise Professionals is the “Warrant of Fitness Check” that exercise professionals and facilities meet New Zealand and internationally benchmarked standards to deliver exercise advice and instruction. REPs is affiliated globally to other national exercise professional registers representing over 210,000 exercise professionals through the International Confederation of Registers for Exercise Professionals (ICREPs) - www.icreps.org

