

# Sports Nutrition

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## THE ATHLETE'S KITCHEN

Ask any coach or college athletic director, and you'll hear concern about alcohol and athletes. Rightfully so. Alcohol abuse is rampant, as are negative consequences including hangovers, nausea and vomiting, poor grades in school, fights, arguments, memory loss, driving under the influence, and trouble with the law—to say nothing of injuries and poor performance. Yet, tailgating before football games, quenching thirst at the pub after a team workout, and celebrating victories with champagne is perceived as the norm and gets perpetuated generation to generation.

College athletes are more likely to drink than non-athletes. Serious recreational runners drink more than their sedentary counterparts. Unfortunately, alcohol is a highly addictive substance and is the most abused drug in the United States, more so than steroids. Prolonged drinking can damage the liver, heart, and brain, and result in cirrhosis, pancreatitis, irregular heart beats, stroke, and malnutrition. A higher rate of oral cancer is seen among even moderate drinkers as compared to abstainers.

**What can be done about this problem?** To address the problem of alcohol abuse among student-athletes, many college campuses are educating students about social norms—the beliefs about what is normal and expected in social situations. For example, “everyone” does not drink nor do “most students” get drunk all the time.

A 1999 survey at Southern Methodist University asked students on Friday about alcohol use on the previous night: Did you drink last night? Did you get drunk last night? What percent of SMU students do *you think* drank last night? What percent of SMU students do *you think* got drunk last night? ([http://smu.edu/healthcenter/alcohol/education/adp\\_socialnorms.asp](http://smu.edu/healthcenter/alcohol/education/adp_socialnorms.asp))

The answers showed major misperceptions about norms: -only 20% of students surveyed reported drinking the previous night, yet they believed that over half had done so.

-only 8% reported getting drunk, yet they believed at least one-third of the students had gotten drunk.

-Of students who drank, most consumed only a few drinks per week. Yet they believed most students had 10 to 15 drinks per week.

-35% reported they abstained from alcohol, but very few believed there were non-drinkers among their peers.

With ongoing social norm education, students actually change their drinking practices. For example, a three-year social norm education program targeted all the athletes at a Division III college in NY State. It contributed to a 30% drop in excessive alcohol consumption. Among athletes with the highest exposure to the program, personal alcohol misuse dropped 50%. Given that athletes are often role models, this change can have a positive impact on the entire campus, and after graduation, our entire society. (Perkins, *J Stud Alcohol*, 2006)

## Alcohol, Athletes & Pressure to Drink

**Minimizing negative consequences** If you are among the athletes who chooses to drink alcohol, take note:

- Alcohol is a depressant. Apart from killing pain, it offers no edge for athletes. You can't be sharp, quick, and drunk.
- Pre-exercise alcohol has a deleterious effect on reaction time, accuracy, balance, eye-hand coordination and endurance. It will not help you exercise faster, stronger, longer.
- Late night partying that contributes to sleep deprivation before the next morning's event will hurt performance.
- Alcohol is a poor source of carbohydrates. You can get loaded with beer, but your muscles will not get carbohydrate. A 12-ounce can of beer has only 14 grams of carbs, as compared to 40 grams in a can of soft drink. Eat pretzels, thick-crust pizza or other carbs along with the beer.
- Alcohol on an empty stomach can quickly lead to a drunken stupor. Be wise; enjoy the natural high of exercise rather than get brought down by a few post-exercise beers.
- Alcohol has a diuretic effect—the more you drink, the more fluids you lose. This is bad for recovery and the next exercise bout. While low-alcohol beer allows for proper rehydration, regular beer sends athletes running to the bathroom. One study showed that athletes who drank beer eliminated about 16 ounces more urine (over the course of 4 hours) than those who drink low-alcohol (2%) beer or alcohol-free beer. (Sherriffs. *J Appl Physiol* 83:1152, 1997)
- Your liver breaks down alcohol at a fixed rate (~1 can beer/hour). Exercise does not hasten the process, nor does coffee. Caffeine just makes you a wide-awake drunk.
- Drinks that contain congeners—whiskey, cognac, and red wine—are more likely to cause hangovers than other alcoholic beverages. The best hangover remedy is to not drink excessively in the first place. But if you have a hangover, consume fluid+carbs+sodium, i.e., Gatorade, noodle soup.
- The calories in alcohol are easily fattening. People who drink moderately tend to consume alcohol-calories on top of their regular caloric intake. These excess calories promote body fat accumulation.
- Alcohol stimulates the appetite; it's harder to feel full when you drink. If you are trying to maintain a lean machine, abstaining is preferable to imbibing.

**The good news:** Alcohol in moderation can have health benefits. Red wine, for example, contains health-protective phytochemicals that may reduce the risk of heart disease.

If you are destined to drink, drink moderately. That means two drinks per day for men, and one for women. And have at least one glass of alcohol-free fluid for every drink....

Nancy Clark MS, RD counsels casual exercisers and competitive athletes at Healthworks, the premier fitness center in Chestnut Hill, MA (617-383-6100). Her **NEW 2008** *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook 4th Edition*, and her *Food Guide for Marathoners and Cyclist's Food Guide* are available via [www.nancyclarkrd.com](http://www.nancyclarkrd.com).