

Pouring on the Pounds: Alcohol and Weight Gain

Alcohol is full of “empty” calories, which are immediately converted to fat, and promptly deposited on our hips and bellies, right? Well, it’s not that simple. Numerous studies on the relation between alcohol consumption and body weight are often contradictory.

How much alcohol, what type of alcohol, lifestyle and gender all seem to play a role in determining how alcohol will affect your weight.

Added calories

Alcohol has about seven calories per gram. These are considered "empty" calories because alcohol contains no beneficial nutrients, such as vitamins and minerals.

Here’s an approximate breakdown:

- an average 12-ounce domestic beer contains about 150 calories
- a 3½-ounce glass of sweet wine contains about 150 calories
- 1½ ounces of 90-proof alcohol contains 110 calories

Carbonated beverages or fruit juices contribute additional calories when mixed with alcohol in a cocktail. And, beware, fancy drinks like white Russians are heavy on alcohol, sugar and cream and can contain more than 500 calories.

Alcohol cancels a fat-burning workout

Not only does alcohol add unneeded calories but it also inhibits your ability to burn fat. Alcohol is metabolized in the liver and converted into a substance called acetate. When we consume alcohol, our acetate levels rise and our bodies then burn acetate as fuel instead of burning the fat we are trying to lose. So alcohol not only adds empty calories, but also hampers the normal fat-burning processes.

Party hard and gain weight

Many studies have revealed, and most health professional agree, that weight gain is greatest among men who are persistent high-volume drinkers. The more they drink and the longer they drink, the more weight they gain.

Although alcohol adds calories, an eight-year study conducted at Harvard University has perplexed scientists. The research concluded that light to moderate drinking (two or less drinks per day) is not associated with weight gain in women.

Similarly, a recent study at the University of New Mexico that sought to correlate body mass index (BMI) with alcohol consumption, found that individuals who drank one to two drinks per day had much lower BMIs than those who drank larger amounts of alcohol per day, but only drank once or twice per week. In other words, those who “party hearty” on the weekends are more likely to retain the calories from alcohol and gain weight than

those who drink in moderation.

Does the type of alcohol matter?

The type of alcohol consumed may explain the discrepant results of studies of alcohol intake and body weight. Some studies reported differing effects of the type of beverage on obesity rates. This may be associated with the lifestyle of certain types of drinkers.

For instance, many red wine drinkers believe that the wine's antioxidant properties provide a valuable health benefit. It follows that a significant proportion of red wine drinkers are health conscious and live healthier lifestyles than, say, men who drink tequila shots after work.

Overall, the available data support the conclusion that daily alcohol intake of three or more drinks per day contributes directly to weight gain. Conversely, moderate drinking does not appear to cause weight gain and is associated with improved cardiovascular health.

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