

Alcohol can boost some of the health perks of exercise. But you have to know what—and when—to drink.



The sipping point
Workout, then wine—it's the ideal evening for so many women these days. In fact, research shows that exercise actually *makes* you more likely to drink. And in the right amount, that combo can be good for you. **But key words: right amount.** Here's your guide. By SARA ANGLE

For many women, exercise and alcohol go hand in hand, a growing body of evidence suggests. Not only do people drink more on days when they hit the gym, according to research published in the journal *Health Psychology*, but women who imbibe moderately (meaning four to seven drinks a week) are twice as likely to work out than their peers who abstain, a study at the University of Miami found.

Turns out barre class and the bar are similar as far as your brain is concerned. "Exercising and drinking alcohol are processed the same way by the brain's reward center," explains J. Leigh Leasure, Ph.D., the director of the neuroscience lab at the University of Houston. Both trigger the release of feel-good neurochemicals like dopamine and endorphins. So to some extent, drinking after a workout is a logical progression: As

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your exercise high wears off, your brain looks for ways to prolong the buzz, such as having a cocktail, Leasure says. Boot campers and bargoers may have overlapping personality traits too. Both are likely to be risk takers, predisposed to seeking out activities that deliver that endorphin rush.

And although you may drink more than your less-fit friends, the habit isn't necessarily bad for your fitness goals. In fact, there's good news. "Unless you're training for a serious competition, having one or two drinks once a week after a workout probably isn't going to have an effect on muscle repair and recovery," says Jakob Vingren, Ph.D., an associate professor at the University of North Texas, who studies alcohol's effect on exercise. In some cases, alcohol might even boost the health perks you get from working out. Women who drank about one glass of wine five times a week and exercised for two to three hours a week improved their cholesterol levels over the course of a year, research presented at the European Society of Cardiology Congress in Barcelona found. Vino drinkers who didn't hit the gym, however, saw no such heart benefits. Alcohol widens blood vessels, which helps the body reduce its level of bad cholesterol, explains researcher Milos Taborsky, Ph.D. Add to that the well-established cardiovascular perks of exercise—lower blood pressure, higher levels of good cholesterol—and you have a winning combo.

Still, when it comes to fitness, all booze isn't good booze. Alcohol is caloric and changes the way you burn fat, says nutritionist Heidi Skolnik, the owner of Nutrition Conditioning, where she works with pro athletes. It also dehydrates you and interferes with your motor control, two things that can be downright dangerous in the weight room or on a treadmill. To stay on the healthy side of the exercise-alcohol equation, here's what—and when—to drink in three common workout situations.

YOU'RE HEADING STRAIGHT FROM SPINNING TO HAPPY HOUR

DOWNING TOO many drinks within three hours of leaving the gym can decrease your body's production of new muscle proteins by up to 37 percent, sapping your strength gains, according to research in the journal *PLOS One*. Before sipping, consume at least 25 grams of protein (about the amount in a protein shake or three ounces of lean meat) immediately after work-



SAFER CHASER Be especially diligent about following each cocktail you drink postworkout with a glass or two of H₂O to prevent dehydration.

ing out, then stick with just one or two alcoholic beverages, suggests Evelyn B. Parr, the lead author of the study. She says this will minimize the effect that booze has on your muscles. But even before scoping out the drink list, ask for a glass of water. After exercising, you'll be dehydrated, and alcohol encourages your body to flush out water. Without enough H₂O in your system, the alcohol you consume will rush straight into your blood and tissues, making you tipsy fast. →

As for what to drink, beer comes out on top. It has a high water volume, so it's more hydrating than other options. In fact, a recent study in the *Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition* found that runners who drank water and a moderate amount of beer rehydrated as effectively as runners who had only water. If you prefer cocktails or wine, steer clear of sugary mixed drinks, which tend to be higher in calories.

YOU OVERINDULGED LAST NIGHT, AND YOU'VE GOT A 7AM WORKOUT CLASS

PLENTY OF PEOPLE claim that the gym is the best cure for a hangover. The truth: While sweating doesn't magically flush the alcohol out of your system, "exercise could make you feel better mentally," Vingren says. But take it easy. Alcohol

can cause low blood sugar, even the next morning, leaving you shaky or weak, says Melissa Leber, M.D., an assistant professor of orthopedics at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. Her advice: 30 to 90 minutes before you head out the door, eat something with a blood sugar-stabilizing mix of protein and carbs, like cereal with milk or a banana with peanut butter. Then wash down your breakfast with a drink that's half H₂O and half sports drink or coconut water to rehydrate and replenish your electrolytes.

Vingren recommends that at the gym, you opt for strength training over a cardio class; research shows that alcohol saps your aerobic ability but not your power. Continue drinking plain water whenever you feel thirsty, and if you develop dizziness, light-headedness, or a headache, call it a day, Dr. Leber says.

YOU'RE FOLLOWING BOOZY BRUNCH WITH AN AFTERNOON WORKOUT

IF YOU'RE FEELING even the slightest bit buzzed, skip your sweat session, Dr. Leber advises. "Alcohol impairs your motor skills, which can increase the risk of injury during a workout," she explains. The moisture-sapping effects of booze are also a concern. "When you're dehydrated, your VO₂ max—the maximum volume of oxygen you can use—decreases, so your performance dips and you have an increased rate of muscle fatigue and cramping," Dr. Leber says.

But if you have only one drink at brunch and down at least two glasses of water, and have one hour or longer before your class starts, you'll probably be fine. Everyone processes alcohol differently, though, so Dr. Leber suggests listening to your body and skipping the session if anything feels off. ★