

FITNESS NUTRITION 101 SERIES:

ALCOHOL

Nate Miyaki

In ten years in the fitness industry, I've seen one vice slow people's body composition goals more than anything else -- alcohol consumption.

Aren't we talking about fitness nutrition here -- proteins, carbs, fats, nutrient timing, calorie deficits, etc.? What does all that have to do with alcohol? That mindset is one of the reasons why alcohol can be so problematic. Most people don't even consider it in their dietary plan. They'll meticulously track numbers and ratios related to food intake, but forget to include the 2-3 drinks a night they have after work, or the all night binge- drinking sessions they have on the weekend.

Any nutrient (or non-nutrient) you consume that is a source of calories must be considered in a fitness nutrition plan. Alcohol contains calories, changes the metabolism of nutrients, and alters hormones that effect body composition transformation. A couple of drinks can quickly take you out of a fat burning mode and into a fat storing mode, so obviously it is an important consideration when developing a game plan geared towards dropping body fat.

Many heavy drinkers often wonder how they could be doing everything right in the gym and kitchen and still not lose any fat. Below is their answer.

1. Alcohol contains calories, almost as many as fat.

The current trend among fitness industry professionals is a love affair with low carbohydrate diets. To them, carbs are the enemy, and it's all about cutting carbs if you want to lose fat. They dispense uninformed advice, promising people they can eat or drink unlimited amounts of anything they want as long as it is low in carbohydrates.

The advertising and marketing executives of alcohol companies are very savvy. They followed the trends and jumped on the bandwagon with an abundance of campaigns promoting heart-healthy wines, low carbohydrate beers, and reminders that pure hard alcohols have always been carbohydrate free. Many ads feature professional models paid to endorse their product, which further confuses the naïve dieter.

The negative effects on body fat have nothing to do with the carbohydrates in alcohol; it has to do with the **calories**. Let's take a look at some numbers regarding alcohol and nutritional counts:

Beverage	Carbohydrates	Calories
Light Beer 12oz	4g	100 calories
Hard liquor (vodka, whiskey, etc.) 1oz	0g	85 calories
Red Wine 4oz	2g	80 calories

Obviously the numbers don't add up if you just consider carbohydrate calories. At 4 calories per gram, there are only 16, 0, and 8 calories from carbohydrates for each respective drink. The actual calorie totals for each drink are obviously much more. What accounts for the difference?

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The booze my friend -- alcohol contains calories, a lot of them! Alcohol contains 7 calories per gram, almost as much as fat. While fat has nutritional value, alcohol has none. They are empty calories that serve no nutritional purpose, except to disrupt metabolism and cause body fat accumulation.

Drinking heavily is almost like eating high fat foods like french fries, pizza, and cheeseburgers all night. It can easily add up to 1,000 calories. Again, it's not about the carbohydrates with alcohol, it's all about the calories. These calories have a high probability of being stored as fat because they do not serve any metabolic purposes.

2. Alcohol shuts down all fat burning in your body

The biggest problem with alcohol is that it limits the body's ability to burn fat as a fuel source. Since alcohol is essentially a poison in your system, your body does everything it can to eliminate it. As soon as alcohol hits your blood stream, your body preferentially begins to use it as a fuel source over all other potential sources.

What does this mean for your body composition goals? All fat burning ceases when alcohol is in your system. It doesn't matter if your diet and exercise protocols have set up the perfect fat burning environment in your body, alcohol stops the fat burning process.

And if you eat while you're drinking, those food calories are much more likely to be stored as body fat than at other times.

3. Alcohol makes you more prone to cheating and bingeing.

How many times have you finished off a night of heavy drinking by gorging on chips or cookies or fries or ice cream? Or how many times have you started the next morning with a plate of greasy bacon or hash browns? There's a reason it's called hangover food. I don't know if it's related to blood sugar or hormones or something else, but I do know that real world evidence is enough to proclaim that alcohol makes it much more likely that you will cheat on your diet and eat junk.

4. Alcohol alters hormone levels.

High and frequent alcohol consumption has been shown to lower testosterone levels. This is particularly detrimental to men. Testosterone helps us build lean muscle and burn body fat. With low testosterone levels, body composition change becomes very difficult. It also impairs sexual activity and performance.

Beer contains large amounts of phytoestrogens. These compounds have the capability of acting like estrogen in the body. Women have higher estrogen-to-testosterone ratios than men. Estrogen results in fat accumulation, and is the reason why women, on average, have higher body fat percentages than men.

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Obviously anything that increases estrogen activity is highly detrimental to your fat loss goals. Fat tissues around the stomach are highly sensitive to the effects of estrogen, hence the beer gut. Women are not immune to this phenomenon. If you are a female and drink a lot of beer, you can develop the tendency to hold fat in your problem areas -- hips, thighs, and stomach.

The moral of the story – don't drink beer. Chronic beer drinking is one of the worst things you can do for your physique. You lower testosterone, raise estrogen, and your hormonal profile begins to resemble more of a woman's than a man's. Beer guts and bitch tits are not myths; they are real results of altered physiology.

Alcohol can also inhibit growth hormone release at night. Growth hormone is one of our most powerful muscle building, fat burning hormones. Disturbances in growth hormone can effect recovery between training sessions and impair body composition transformation.

BURSTING THE RATIONALIZATION BUBBLE

People will come up with all kinds of rationalizations to defend their alcohol consumption; none of them are really valid from a health and fitness standpoint. Here are some of my favorites:

"Alcohol is good for the heart, flushes the heart, dilates the blood vessels, etc." So does exercise and fish oils.

"Alcohol raises good cholesterol (HDL)." So do monounsaturated fats.

"Alcohol contains antioxidants." So do fruits, vegetables, and green tea.

The difference is with the latter group you get the health benefits without the drawbacks of alcohol consumption. Besides its negative effects on body composition, alcohol is just not that great for overall health. It stresses the liver because the liver must detoxify the body of alcohol. It puts strain on the kidneys because alcohol dehydrates you.

The studies on alcohol, particularly red wine, generally recommend a 3oz serving to obtain the health benefits. Who the hell just drinks 3 oz of wine? C'mon now, don't use research studies based on tiny portion sizes to legitimize over-consumption.

The last rationalization I hear regularly from model-types: "Just cut out food from your diet to compensate for increased alcohol consumption." Calories from proteins, fats, and carbohydrates perform specific nutritional functions in the body. They are essential for building muscle.

Remember, getting lean is as much about gaining or maintaining muscle as it is about losing body fat. Alcohol is an empty calorie and does nothing for the body. Replacing food calories with alcohol calories does not make any sense. You will be robbing your body of the essential nutrients it needs to build muscle, provide energy, and recover from workouts. And as we mentioned above, alcohol completely shuts down the body's ability to burn fat until it is out of the system, which can take several hours.

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FITNESS DRINKING?

I'm not here to tell you what you or I want to hear. I'm here to tell you the objective truth. In my personal opinion, there is no such thing as drinking for health or fitness reasons. You can get all of the benefits of alcohol with better food, beverage, or supplementation choices. To drink for "health" reasons based on some research study is faulty logic at best. Statistics and research can be slanted to make you believe whatever you want to believe.

If you drink, be honest with yourself. You're drinking to relax, party, have a good time, get wasted, celebrate, or maybe even for more destructive reasons (that are beyond the scope of this article), but you're not drinking for your health.

I'll be honest, I like to drink from time-to-time. I like the occasional celebratory drink with family and friends, or the occasional buzz with a night out on the town. Hell, I don't think I would have asked out my wife back in the day if I didn't have the "liquid courage" going that night. But I don't delude myself into thinking I'm doing something healthy. In fact, I know a night of drinking takes me further away from my health and fitness goals.

What I don't do is drink when I'm in training for a natural bodybuilding show, or prepping for a photo shoot. In other words, I cut out all of the booze when I'm trying to reach peak body composition levels. It's just something you have to do to maximize your potential.

My best advice for fitness athletes is this:

1. First, a test. If you are a heavy drinker, don't drink any alcohol for 3-4 weeks straight. If you can't do that, you may have a problem that is beyond the scope of this article. You may want to consider seeking professional help.
2. Don't drink every night to relax. This is a bad habit to get into. Find more positive ways to relax (stretching, yoga, music, etc.).
3. Save "drinking nights" for special occasions -- birthdays, weddings, family celebrations, nights out on the town, etc. Don't get wasted every weekend.
4. Stay away from drinks mixed with sugar beverages or fruit juices. The sugar + alcohol virtually guarantees fat storage.
5. Stay away from beer due to the negative effects on testosterone/estrogen.
6. Stick with red wine, straight hard alcohols, or alcohols mixed with no calorie beverages.

Don't get the wrong idea. Just because I've given you some ways to limit the damage, as any good trainer working with real people in real situations should, I would like to reaffirm my position on alcohol. If you want to maximize your results from training and dieting, you should NOT drink on a regular basis.

PERSONAL CASE STUDY

I'll share with you a personal example that I believe will further my stance against alcohol for the fitness athlete. I started training a private client a couple of years ago. He was a former

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Division I college athlete, so I knew at some point in his life he had been very athletic and fit. Unfortunately corporate life, married life, and then divorced life took its toll on him, and he came to me about 40lbs overweight, borderline obese, and ready to make some positive changes.

As an ex-athlete, this guy quickly regained his strength and athletic coordination. Within months, we were using advanced programs and training with great intensity and consistency. The problem was, his body composition was not changing. Sure there were minor improvements, but he was still severely overweight.

We tried dietary changes next. He followed every suggestion I made 100% of the time. He even tracked his food in a journal every day and brought it into the gym each time we trained. I tried every nutritional tip in my arsenal. We went low carbohydrate, low fat, nutrient timing, carbohydrate rotations, the zig-zag approach, etc. After months, there still were no dramatic changes.

Now I was worried. The next step we took was to send him to an Endocrinologist. Perhaps there was an underlying medical condition we were unaware of. He had a complete blood panel, specifically analyzing his hormonal profile. These tests included things like thyroid, cortisol, testosterone, DHEA, and estrogen just to name a few. Everything checked out as normal.

What my client failed to mention from the beginning was that he was a borderline alcoholic. The truth came out when he went from borderline to full-blown, and checked himself into a rehabilitation clinic. After a few months of sobering up and getting his life back together, he came back to the gym ready to give it a second chance.

This time, the final outcome was much different. He dropped about 30lbs of body fat and gained probably 15 pounds of rock hard muscle, all in about 3-4 months. His transformation was incredible. He said he felt like he was in the best shape of his life, even better than his competitive athletic days. We used the same training and dieting techniques we had used originally, the only difference was that he had stopped drinking.

If you are going to give this whole fitness thing a try, than you owe it to yourself to go dry for a little while and see what you can really accomplish. If you really feel you have to drink, than try limiting it to special occasions. You'll never maximize your body composition drinking daily or binge drinking every weekend.