

Alcohol and Sports Performance

Playing, celebrating and drinking

The social side of Gaelic Games is very important and celebrating with team members after a match is a tradition in some clubs. However, if your celebrations involve drinking alcohol and especially if you drink to the point where you get drunk, this can seriously affect your fitness. If you take your sport seriously, and like to do the best you can for yourself and your team, it's worth knowing the facts and what you can do to reduce your risk of poor performance.

Effects of alcohol on your performance

- **Greater risk of muscle cramps:** During exercise, your muscles burn sugar thereby producing lactic acid. Too much lactic acid leads to muscle fatigue and cramps. If you drink in the 24 hour period before a match the alcohol contributes to a bigger build up of lactic acid and dramatically increases your risk of cramping.
- **Greater risk for injuries and complications:** Alcohol increases the bleeding and swelling around soft tissue injuries (sprains, bruises, and cuts- the most common sports injuries) requiring a longer recovery period. Alcohol also masks pain, which may lead you to delay in getting treatment - rapid treatment can make all the difference in a speedy recovery. If you've been injured, avoid alcohol, as it will complicate your recovery.
- **Greater body heat loss:** Alcohol is a vasodilator (it causes the blood vessels near the surface of the skin to expand) and thereby promotes heat loss and a lowered body temperature.
- **Reduced endurance:** The blood sugar your body needs for energy is produced by the liver when it releases glucose into the blood stream. Drinking alcohol in the 48 hour period before a match reduces your body's ability to produce this sugar, so you have less energy and less endurance capacity.
- **Slower reactions:** Alcohol is a sedative and it can affect your performance during a game for up to 72 hours after you have finished drinking. Some players think they have less tension and increased relaxation as a result of alcohol. The actual result, however, is poorer hand-eye coordination and slower responses.
- **Dehydration:** Alcohol promotes water loss. It reduces the production of the anti-diuretic hormone, causing you to urinate more. This, in turn leads to dehydration.
- **Vitamin and Mineral Depletion:** Water loss caused by alcohol consumption involves the additional loss of important minerals such as magnesium, potassium, calcium, and zinc. These are vital to the maintenance of fluid balance and nerve and muscle action and coordination.
- **Reduced aerobic performance:** Alcohol reduces the body's ability to convert food to energy and also reduces carbohydrate/blood sugar levels. These effects, together with lactic acid build-up and dehydration, combine to reduce aerobic performance.
- **Muscle injury:** The usual treatment for injury (rest, ice, compression, elevation) can be negated due to the painkilling effect of alcohol. If you can't feel the pain of your injury you are less likely to take care of it and slow your recovery time or even cause further damage.

So, no matter how much training and conditioning you've put in, drinking up to 72 hours before a match will take the edge off your fitness. If you want to be the very best you be at your sport you'll have more of a chance of achieving that by not drinking alcohol. However if you do want to drink it's best to drink a little and not too often. For more information visit www.gaa.ie/asap