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Do drinking and weight loss mix? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I work out for an hour everyday (aerobic) and eat fairly healthy (vegetarian/well-balanced) with a reasonable goal of losing 10 pounds in the next 4 months to go from 126 to 116 lbs. However, I also enjoy drinking and have, on average, 3 to 4 drinks a day of mostly hard booze. I'm wondering if it is actually possible to lose weight while drinking this much alcohol, or if I'm shooting myself in the foot. Also, for a woman of my size, is it very unhealthy to drink this amount of alcohol?

Answer

Dear Reader,

From your letter, it looks as though you take good care of yourself — you exercise regularly and watch what you eat. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to lose weight while you include 3 to 4 drinks of hard liquor a day. Not only do those 3 to 4 drinks each day have a number of calories, it is difficult for your body to process that much alcohol every single day and could lead to other, non-weight-related, health problems.

Alcohol contains calories (even hard liquor) and has other effects on your appetite that may interfere with your weight loss efforts. First of all, an ounce of hard liquor (gin, vodka, rum, whiskey, or scotch) contains 64 calories for 80 proof varieties, and 80 calories for those that are 100 proof. The proof refers to the percentage of alcohol in the liquor (80 proof is 40 percent alcohol; 100 proof is 50 percent alcohol). The alcohol in your 3 to 4 drinks could be contributing anywhere from 192 to 320 calories. That's if you're using only one ounce per drink (many drinks at bars or made at home are made with more than an ounce). If you're also adding a mixer, the calories may soar! Consider that per 8 oz. cup, orange juice contains 111 calories, regular cola or lemon-lime soda pop has about 100 calories, and regular ginger ale, tonic, or quinine water has around 80 calories. If you are having mixed drinks, you can easily be taking in over 500 calories per day from your libations. That's nearly one-third of the minimum total daily intake range of 1,600 to 2,400 calories for an "average" sized, moderately active woman.

In addition to the calories, alcohol interferes with fat burning, something important for weight loss. Normally, the liver metabolizes fats, but when a person drinks, alcohol takes preference. The

liver breaks down alcohol for energy first, causing a build-up of fatty acids. What this means is that the body uses the calories supplied from alcohol before it is able to expend the calories from fat. This characteristic is referred to as "fat sparing," meaning alcohol's presence spares the fat from being utilized for energy. Alcohol also stimulates appetite in many people. This may thwart your weight loss efforts even more.

Besides adding empty calories, your alcohol intake may be jeopardizing your health. Messages in the media about alcohol can be quite confusing. Let's start with an explanation about how alcohol influences your nutritional status, and then about how it impacts your risk for other diseases. First of all, alcohol affects the hormones responsible for fluid balance. As a result, it causes drinkers to urinate frequently, losing body fluids. When thirsty drinkers have another alcoholic beverage, the vicious cycle of urination --> dehydration --> thirst continues. The only way to break the cycle is to have water or another non-alcoholic beverage. Along with the fluids drinkers lose, they excrete important nutrients as well: calcium, magnesium, potassium, and zinc. Alcohol also interferes with the absorption of vitamins B-1 (thiamin), B-6, B-12, and folate. It causes problems in processing Vitamins A and D, too. As a consequence, nutritional deficiencies are often seen in people who over-imbibe alcohol.

There's been some recent research about alcohol's protective benefits from heart disease, specifically by increasing HDL, the "good" cholesterol. However, the risk of death from diseases including many types of cancer (colon, breast, liver, and oral), hypertension, liver disease, heart disease, and others is positively linked with alcohol consumption. The greater the amounts of alcohol women drink, particularly at younger ages, the greater the likelihood of death from one of the above-mentioned diseases. This latest study also shows that the risks are lowest for non-drinkers under the age of 35, for both men and women. For 16- to 24-year-olds, risks increase when women drink more than 8 drinks per week and men drink more than 5 drinks per week. Risks also increase with age when women have 8 to 20 drinks a week, and when men have 5 to 34 drinks a week.

To learn more about your own drinking pattern, have you thought about why your drinking is at the level you describe? For example, you may want to ask yourself questions, such as:

- What does drinking 3 to 4 drinks of hard liquor every day offer you?
- What might happen if you cut down to one drink a day, or gradually limit yourself to 3 to 4 throughout the week?
- What is encouraging you to lose weight?
- Might a desire to be healthy motivate you to modulate your drinking?

There are people to talk with who have made similar changes — seeing a nutritionist, your own health care provider or gynecologist, or a counselor may give you a start on a path to healthier behaviors and choices. Sending in your question was an important first step.

For more information about alcohol and its effects, go to the alcohol section of the [Alcohol and Other Drugs](#) [2] archive in *Go Ask Alice!*

Alice!

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