

Drinking alcohol and exercising don't mix ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Is it bad to exercise while slightly drunk? Some friends like to hike and drink beer. I find that I get flushed easily, and tire more quickly. What's going on?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's no surprise that this hiking-drinking combo produces these symptoms. The hike itself can make you build a sweat and feel weary, and adding alcohol to the mix can leave you feeling more worn out. Alcohol is a diuretic — it's this action that makes you pee more (not an uncommon experience for beer drinkers). When people urinate, they can become thirsty, and if they drink more alcohol to quench this thirst, a cycle begins, leading to dehydration. One symptom of dehydration is fatigue. In addition, dehydration causes the body's cooling system to work improperly. Becoming flushed is the way your body compensates, sending blood (which contains oxygen) to your skin to help you cool off.

Alcohol can also affect hiking, and any other activity, in other ways. When we drink more of it than we can process, the alcohol hitches around the body until the liver is ready for it. During this time, it flows to the brain and produces a sedating effect. Many people think alcohol is a stimulant because it makes them lively and uninhibited at first — but it does this by sedating inhibitory nerves! Reasoning and judgment are impaired first, followed by effects on speech, vision, and large muscle control. This impairment of your coordination and motor skills can make drinking alcohol and exercising a dangerous duo.

Finally, you need energy to work out, but the calories from alcohol are unique in that they cannot be stored for energy in the muscles. Speaking of muscles, they cannot contract properly without certain valuable electrolytes, such as magnesium, calcium, and potassium, minerals which are lost along with fluids that you pee out because of alcohol's diuretic effect.

Staying well-hydrated and fully alert when hiking, exercising, driving, operating other heavy machinery, etc., can only help you stay safer, too.

Alice!

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