
Why Some People Can Drink Alcohol Without Getting Fat

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Alcohol has been implicated as a factor that may hurt your efforts to lose body fat. Whether alcohol is "fattening" has been a very controversial subject because technically speaking, alcohol is NOT stored as fat; it is oxidized ahead of other fuels.

Whether moderate drinking is healthy has also been a subject of controversy. Many studies show that cardiovascular health benefits are associated with moderate beer or wine drinking (which has been of particular interest lately with resveratrol in the news so much), while other studies show improved insulin sensitivity. Some experts however, say that alcohol has no place in a fitness lifestyle.

A recent study published in the journal Obesity adds new findings to our knowledge about alcohol, insulin resistance and abdominal obesity. Analysis of the results as compared to other studies also gives us some insights into why some people seem to drink and get fat while others seem to drink and get thin!

The truth about the beer belly phenomenon

This new study, by Ulf Riserus and Erik Inglesson, was based on the Swedish Uppsala Longitudinal cohort. The researchers found that alcohol intake in older men did not improve insulin sensitivity, which contradicted their own hypothesis and numerous previous studies.

They also said there was a very "robust" association between alcohol intake, waist circumference and waist to hip ratio. They pointed out that a high alcohol intake, especially hard liquor, was closely associated with abdominal body fat, not just overall body mass.

Abdominal fat accumulation is not just a cosmetic problem, it can be a serious health risk. Abdominal fat, also known as "android" or "central" obesity, increases the risk for cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, high blood lipids, glucose intolerance and elevated insulin levels.

Many other studies have also found a link between alcohol intake and abdominal fat, but this too has been controversial. A study that was widely publicized by the BBC in 2003 dismissed the concept of the "beer belly."

Nevertheless, it looks like there's some scientific support to it after all (or at least a "liquor belly" according to this newer study).

Hormones may be strongly involved because high alcohol intake has been shown to decrease blood testosterone in men, and also increase cortisol levels, which can lead to visceral fat accumulation.

Why is there so much controversy? Why the discrepancy in research findings about alcohol's influence on obesity, abdominal fat, and insulin sensitivity?

Well, here's the real story of why some people don't get fat when they drink:

A lot of the confusion is because epidemiological research cannot show cause and effect relationships and mistakes can easily be made when drawing associations based on limited data.

With the nature of these longitudinal studies, you have to look at the lifestyle and nature of drinkers in general (or in this study, hard liquor drinkers). Also, the Swedish study focused on older men, so age may have been a factor. You may be more likely to deposit alcohol right on your belly as you get older.

When you hear that alcohol increases belly fat, you also have to look at what else is going on in the life of the drinker, particularly what the rest of a person's diet looks like, and how alcohol intake affects appetite and eating habits.

Research says that alcohol can mess up your body's perception of hunger, satiety and fullness. If drinking stimulates additional eating, or adds additional calories that aren't compensated for and which lead to positive energy balance, then you get fat. You may also get fat in the belly, no thanks to what booze does to hormones.

Another thing that confounds the reports on whether alcohol contributes to weight gain is the fact that the game changes in heavy drinkers. We know that alcohol contains 7.1 calories per gram and these calories always count as part of the energy balance equation... or do they? With chronic excessive alcohol consumption, it's possible that not all of these calories are available for energy. Due to changes in liver function and something called the microsomal ethanol oxidizing system (MEOS), alcoholism may be a real case of where some calories don't count. Many alcoholics also skip meals and eat less with increasing alcohol consumption.

Alcohol metabolizing pathways notwithstanding, even if binge drinkers, daily drinkers or heavy drinkers consume most of their calories from alcohol, if they eat very little, and remain in a calorie deficit, they will not get fat. Compound this with the hormonal effects and you witness the skinny, but under-nourished, unhealthy and atrophied alcoholic (the person you'd think would be most likely to have a beer belly).

It's the calories that count

The bottom line is, the idea that alcohol just automatically turns into fat or gives you a beer belly is mistaken. It's true that alcohol suppresses fat oxidation, but mainly, alcohol

adds calories into your diet, messes with your hormones and can stimulate appetite, leading to even more calories consumed. That's where the fat gain comes from.

If you drink in moderation, if you're aware of the calories in the alcohol, if you're aware of the calories from additional food intake consumed during or after drinking, and if you compensate for all of the above accordingly, you won't get fat.

Now, with that said, you might be wondering: "You mean I can drink and still lose fat? I just need to keep in a calorie deficit?"

Yes, that's exactly what I mean. But before you rush off to the pub for a cold one, hold that thought for a minute while you consider this first: The empty alcohol calories displace the nutrient dense calories!

When you're on a fat loss program you have a fairly small "calorie budget", so you need to give some careful thought to how those calories should be "spent." For example, if a female is on a 1500 calorie per day diet, does she really want to "spend" 500 of those calories – one third of her intake - for a few alcoholic drinks, and leave only 1000 for health-promoting food, fiber and lean muscle building protein?

I realize some people may answer "yes" to that question, but then again, if some people spent their money as frivolously as they spent their calories, they would be in deep trouble!

To summarize this into some practical, take-home advice, here are 7 of my personal tips for alcohol consumption in the fitness lifestyle:

(1) Don't drink on a fat loss program. Although you could certainly drink and "get away with it" if you diligently maintained your calorie deficit as noted above, it certainly does not help your fat loss cause or your nutritional status.

(2) Drink in moderation during maintenance. For lifelong weight maintenance and a healthy lifestyle, if you drink, do so in moderation and only occasionally, such as on weekends or when you go out to dine in restaurants. Binge drinking and getting drunk has no place in a fitness lifestyle (not to mention hangovers aren't very conducive to good workouts).

(3) Don't drink daily. Moderate drinking, including daily drinking, has been associated with cardiovascular health benefits. However, I don't recommend daily drinking because behaviors repeated daily become habits. Behaviors repeated multiple times daily become strong habits. Habitual drinking may lead to heavier drinking or full-blown addictions and can be hard to stop if you ever need to cut back.

(4) Count the calories. If you decide to have a bottle of beer or a glass of wine or two (or whatever moderation is for you), be sure to account for the alcohol in your daily calorie budget.

(5) Watch your appetite. Don't let the "munchies" get control of you during or after you drink (Note to chicken wing and nacho-eating men: The correlation to alcohol and body fat is higher in men in almost all the studies. One possible explanation is that men tend to drink and eat, while women may tend to drink instead of eating).

(6) Watch the fatty foods. When drinking, watch the fatty foods in particular. A study by Angelo Tremblay back in 1995 suggested that alcohol and a high fat diet are a combination that favors overfeeding.

(7) Enjoy without guilt. If you choose to drink (moderately and sensibly), then don't feel guilty about it or beat yourself up afterwards, just enjoy the darn stuff, will you!

To see a complete fat burning system that takes you by the hand, step by step and shows you what to eat, what to drink (and what not drink), how to exercise and how to stay motivated, visit: www.BurnTheFat.com

References:

(1) Alcohol Intake, Insulin Resistance, and abdominal obesity in elderly men. Riserus U, Ingelsson E., Obesity. 15(7): 1766-1773. 2007

About the Author:

Tom Venuto is a natural bodybuilder, certified strength and conditioning specialist (CSCS) and a certified personal trainer (CPT). Tom is the author of "Burn the Fat, Feed The Muscle," which teaches you how to get lean without drugs or supplements using methods of the world's best bodybuilders and fitness models. Learn how to get rid of stubborn fat and increase your metabolism by visiting: www.BurnTheFat.com