



## **Alcohol and Sleep Don't Mix**

If you think that drinking alcohol helps you sleep better, think again. A few drinks might help you fall asleep quicker, but consuming alcohol does not improve your quality of sleep. In fact, you may feel like you didn't get any sleep at all when you wake up. This can be a problem because even one poor sleep can negatively affect your memory, attention, coordination and response time.

## **Effects of Alcohol Consumption on Your Sleeping Pattern**

Alcohol consumption affects your sleep quality in a number of ways. When you drink alcohol before you go to sleep, it increases your level of sleepiness and reduces the time you need to fall asleep. This is because alcohol is a depressant, meaning that it slows down parts of your brain that control your thinking, behaviour, breathing, and heart rate. When your blood-alcohol content begins to fall, it leads to an increase in fatigue and relaxation. Once you fall asleep, the alcohol then causes you to miss out on a key stage of the sleep cycle known as rapid eye movement (REM); instead, your body goes right into deep sleep. The REM sleep stage is when you dream, and is important because this is when your body restores itself. During a night when you haven't had anything to drink, you will typically have six to seven cycles of REM sleep. When you've been drinking, you may only have one or two cycles. This leaves you feeling tired when you wake up despite having the same amount of sleep you usually do when you haven't drunk alcohol. Bottom line – even the smallest amounts of alcohol before bed can have disruptive effects on your sleep compared to when you don't consume alcohol.

## **How Alcohol Disrupts Your Sleep**

Alcohol disrupts your sleep particularly during the second half of the night. Depending on how much you consume, as the alcohol begins to metabolize and wear off, the body shifts out of deep sleep and back into REM sleep. This in turn causes an increase in light sleep, and frequent night-time and early-morning awakenings, leaving you feeling tired the next morning. In addition, alcohol is a diuretic, so if you've had a lot to drink before going to bed, you may have to wake up one or more times to go to the bathroom.



### **Effects of Alcohol on Sleep Disorders**

For those that have trouble sleeping, consuming alcohol is not the solution. In fact, regular consumption of alcohol as a sleeping aid may result in a number of problems including alcohol dependence. Alcohol as a sleep aid can actually backfire leading to sleeping disorders such as insomnia, or breathing disorders such as obstructive sleep apnea. Older adults may be at an even greater risk of alcohol-related sleep problems because they attain higher levels of alcohol in their blood and brain compared to younger adults when they consume the same alcohol dose. The opposite is also true; sleep deprivation heightens the effects of alcohol on your body, so someone who is tired and drinks will become more impaired compared to someone that has had adequate rest.

### **Sleep Apnea**

Sleep apnea is a disorder where breathing stops and starts repeatedly throughout the night because the airway becomes blocked when surrounding muscles and tissue collapse. Alcohol can contribute to this as it relaxes the muscles in the throat. Your body moves in and out of sleep cycles, even though you might not be aware. As a result, when you stop breathing, your brain detects it and wakes you up, decreasing the overall quality of your sleep.  
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### **Alcohol is Not a Sleeping Aid**

In fact, alcohol has no safe level of consumption. If you plan on drinking alcohol, follow the Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines available online at the [Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse website](#) and stop drinking at least four to six hours before you go to sleep. This will allow your body to have enough time to fully metabolize the alcohol (depending on how much alcohol was consumed), so that it decreases the disruption in your sleep cycle. Of course, the more alcohol you drink, the longer your body will need to remove it from your system. If you are having difficulty sleeping and don't consume alcohol, see your healthcare provider as they will be able to rule out any underlying health issues and recommend appropriate next steps.

### **Key Reference**

Ebrahim, I.O., Shapiro, C.M., Williams, A.J., & Fernwick, P.B. (2013). Alcohol and Sleep I: Effects on Normal Sleep. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 37(4), 539-549.