

ALCOHOL USE & THE ATHLETE

Use of alcohol is prevalent in today's society. But because exercise is a complex activity utilizing many of the body's organ systems, and alcohol has an effect on most of these systems, athletes especially need to be aware of the effects alcohol has on athletic performance. Although "how" alcohol affects a person depends on the amount consumed and individual differences in tolerance, drinking five or more drinks on any one occasion affects the brain and body for several days.

Possible effects of elevated blood alcohol levels on exercise/performance:

- *motor skills
 - slowed reaction time
 - decreased hand-eye coordination
 - decreased accuracy and balance
 - impaired tracking, visual search, recognition and response skills
- *strength, power, & short-term performances
 - decrease in overall performance levels
 - slower running times
 - weakening of the pumping force of the heart
 - impaired temperature regulation during exercise
 - decreased grip strength and jump height
 - faster fatigue during high-intensity exercise
- *aerobic performance
 - dehydration and significantly reduced aerobic performance
 - increased health risks during prolonged exercise in hot environments
- *other concerns
 - alcohol has been linked to exercise-induced asthma & severe allergic reactions could cause heart irritability leading to an irregular heart beat
- *special concerns for women
 - a woman's level of strength is negatively affected by the total life-time doses of alcohol
 - a woman's heart may be more sensitive than a man's heart to the toxic effects of alcohol

Effects of CHRONIC alcohol consumption (regular use/abuse) on athletic performance

- *impairs cardiovascular response to exercise
- *causes nutritional deficiencies (from how the body uses nutrients to how it excretes them)
- *causes muscle damage, wasting & weakness in various muscles, including the heart
- *changes the body's hormonal environment, making it less conducive to increasing muscle mass & strength

How does alcohol use/abuse affect sports-related injuries?

- *athletes who drink alcohol at least once per week have an elevated risk of injury as compared to athletes who do not drink
- *consuming alcohol regularly depresses immune functioning and slows the healing process
- *some athletic injuries are likely related to a decrease in such things as reaction time & impaired judgement

What's the Big Picture?

When athletes make decisions about drinking, they may want to consider:

- *How important is my sport to me?
- *How important is it that I perform to the best of my ability?
- *How will drinking affect my ability to perform?
- *What are the consequences if I violate team and state rules?
- *Will I put myself or others at risk if I drink?
- *How can I stay motivated not to drink?