

Alcohol

Alcohol in itself is tasteless. It is the chemistry of 'congeners' that comes along for the ride in a bottle of booze, giving a drink its colour, flavour and character. It stems from various sources like aging of the liquor, fermentation or other spirit-making processes.

Vodka, for instance, comes closest to being simply alcohol mixed with water and therefore has the least of congeners, followed by gin, which uses herbs and spices to give the liquid its unique flavour.

Scotch has four times as many of these chemicals as gin, brandy, rum and malts have about six times as many. Tiny amounts of alcohol are produced by bacteria in our body all the time. When alcohol enters our gullet, it reacts with an enzyme in the stomach and liver that converts the alcohol to acetaldehyde. While alcohol makes you drunk, the accumulation of acetaldehyde gives you a hangover. Your body can burn off about a half ounce of pure alcohol (about the amount in a single dose) in an hour.

It is simple mathematics that demonstrates that a 12 ounce beer (which is 5% alcohol) contains about a half ounce of alcohol; the same is true for a five ounce glass of wine (which is 12% alcohol) or a one and a half ounce shot of 80 proof whisky (which is 40% alcohol). About 20-30% of the alcohol is absorbed into the blood through the stomach and small intestine.

The alcohol in our bloodstream travels to various parts of the body. When it reaches the brain it replaces water molecules and thus slows down brain efficiency. Overdose of alcohol shuts down the central nervous system to the point where our brain stops sending out signals reminding you to breathe!!

One starts feeling hungry when alcohol breaks down our body's molecular energy stores and one feels an urge to urinate more frequently because it shuts down production of hormone that helps our body reabsorb water.

Finally, it is quantity, not quality, that results in a hangover. Congeners merely enhance the pain, but the real culprit is alcohol and its chemical reaction. All alcoholic drinks are high in calories and dismally low in protein. Despite centuries of claims to the contrary, there is no cure for the whisky blues. The Germans eat bananas with red meat for breakfast, the Chinese drink tea brewed from spinach. The Swiss suck a can of oxygen while the Russians recommend more of Vodka!!

Remember that there is no such things as a bad drink, just bad drinkers. Studies suggest that a little bit of drinking - one or two pegs a day - might be beneficial to your health. It possibly reduces the incidence of heart disease and further, moderate drinkers rarely catch cold.

✕ Caffeine

Coffee, the world's most popular drink, gets the kick from caffeine that occurs naturally in some 60 types of plants - coffee, tea and cocoa are the best known. Caffeine is blamed for many health problems ranging from addiction and heart disease to low birth weight in babies. A person who drinks five or more cups of coffee daily often faces the risk of getting a heart disease.

Caffeine stimulates the central nervous system and affects chemical messengers in the brain called neurotransmitters. Consequently, it makes you feel more alert and enhances concentration and performance. It also speeds up your metabolism, making you burn more calories, but the increase is so small it won't make you lose weight. Excess caffeine (more than 5/6 cups or 12 cans of cola) can cause shakiness and it is best advised to remain within the four cup limit. John Hopkin Medical School in Washington advises limiting coffee to not more than two cups per day.

Caffeine has been held responsible for raising both cholesterol and blood pressure. Other studies hold it responsible for breast cancer and miscarriage. Caffeine is further believed to increase the rate at which our bodies get rid of calcium and it was thought that it could increase the risk of bone shrinkage. However, the Scottish Heart Health Study discounts any link between coffee, caffeine and heart diseases.

Changing to decaffeinated coffee does not automatically solve the problems linked with coffee. It should be ensured that decaffeination has been achieved by the process of water extraction because when chemicals are used in the process of solvent extraction, some residues of chemicals are left behind.

✕ Exercise

There are a number of reasons why healthy exercises cross the line into unhealthy behaviour. Often the goal is to lose weight, while others may be inclined to think that if moderate exercise is so obviously good for your body, then heavy exercise must be twice as good!

However, the fact remains that even if you don't feel it immediately, repeated stress and prolonged repetitive movements without rest are sure to result in injury to your muscles, ligaments, tendons and joints, and this will only worsen with repeated activity.

Moderate, balanced and regular exercise, such as brisk walking, provides numerous benefits including higher energy levels, lower risk of ischemic stroke, toning up of body and improved posture. It can help to lower the risk of heart disease, build a strong immune system and increase bone density. It is also a valuable way of distressing after a hard day's work.

The problem is that too much exercise will have the opposite effect. A minimum of 20 minutes exercise, three times a week (this is a minimum) is ideal. Often people undertake exercise to achieve healthy benefits with the aim of enjoying life more, but an obsessive exercise routine leaves no time for relaxation or rewards.

Long distance runners who log 60 miles a week are more likely to suffer from degenerative hip diseases compared to other fit athletes who just run seven miles a week.

In most of the exercise programmes 'recovery' is the missing element where people train and train but overlook the idea that resting and recovering is what makes people fitter. What is considered to be "too much" exercise will vary from person to person. If you are not sure you may contact a professional trainer to help devise a fitness programme to suit your fitness level.

✘ Fibre

Fibre rich foods are welcome for our digestive system but unfortunately some people follow the maxim that if little is good, a lot will be much better. It is hard to overdose on dietary fibre, since you'd tend to start feeling very full before you achieve the danger zone. Possibly six bowls of fibre rich cereal in one sitting will be enough to demonstrate the bad stomach ache from all those fermented carbohydrates in your gut.

Even fibre rich medications used in weight loss have been reported to swell up before they reach the stomach, causing a blockage. Dietary fibre is essential to ward off constipation but all precaution is required while prescribing concentrated fibre.

✘ Noise

Loud noise including music wears down the delicate hair cells in the inner ear that translate sound into nerve impulses. The amount of damage and whether it is permanent or temporary depends on the loudness and duration of exposure.

Sitting in front of a wall of amplifiers at a rock concert for two hours is enough to do some permanent damage to your hearing. One warning sign that you're being exposed to noise that is too loud is a ringing tone in your ear. Your ears are trying to tell you that they've been bruised. The longer or more intense the exposure, the longer the ear rings after the noise concludes. Another indication is the fullness in the ears after excessive noise exposure.

✘ Salt

Millions of lives could be saved if we ate less salt because there would be fewer heart attacks and strokes. This was the finding of specialists at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London after they analysed data from 78 studies involving 47,000 people around the world.

Salt in our daily life comes from various sources. It comes naturally in a good number of foods like meat, fruits, vegetables and dairy products. Food manufacturers add salt to most canned and bottled products.

The specialists say that if people over 50 were to cut their intake of salt by three grams a day - that's about half a teaspoon - heart disease would be reduced by a sixth and strokes by a fifth. Our body requires 500 milligrams of salt (one sixth of a teaspoon). Although some people may swear they can't enjoy a meal unless they've reached for the salt first, it doesn't take long to get used to food without it. You won't find many simpler ways of improving your chances of staying healthy so it makes sense to cut back.