

How Alcohol Affects Sleep Quality

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There's nothing like enjoying a tittle or two over the festive season. It's a time for raising a glass in celebration, warming up over a mulled wine, sharing stories in the pub and winding down with a soothing nightcap. Drinking together is how many of us celebrate and spend precious time with one another.

And yet, all those extra treats and toasts that we allow ourselves at this time of year can quickly add up and you may now – in the post-festive period – still be feeling the effects without realising it. For example, did you know that alcohol can have negative effects on our sleep? Many of us have experienced the headaches and nausea that often come after a night of heavy drinking, but did you know that tiredness, lethargy and low mood can also be attributed to alcohol consumption?

So if you've been feeling a little run down and fatigued, it might not be just because of your busy schedule or the stress of Christmas planning; it could be because alcohol continues to prevent you from getting enough good quality sleep.

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How Does Alcohol Affect Your Sleep Pattern?

Adults usually cycle through four stages during sleep, including light sleep, deep sleep and REM sleep, which are repeated every 90 minutes or so. To wake up feeling refreshed and restored, we need to spend time in each of the stages throughout the night. Because alcohol is a sedative, people who drink may find it easier to fall asleep initially – however, they tend to fall straight into a deep sleep, skipping REM sleep in the first couple of cycles.

This creates an imbalance and is often the reason why, after a big night, we don't wake up feeling refreshed. Alcohol is also a diuretic, which may result in extra trips to the bathroom, or cause us to wake up feeling thirsty.

Lack of good quality sleep also has knock-on effects during the day. Our memories may not be as sharp, we may feel sluggish or slow, or we might just not be as calm and patient as usual. This isn't good at the best of times let alone if we're dealing with busy (or stressful) life events. Recognising the signs and taking steps to resolve the problem could save you a lot of headaches – physical, and metaphorical!

Why Can't I Sleep After Drinking?

How much alcohol a person can tolerate will vary from one individual to another, but research has shown that even a small amount of alcohol is enough to disrupt our sleep patterns. For example, one study found that one drink for women and two for men decreased sleep quality by 24%, while any more than that decreased it by almost 40%.

On average, it takes a person around one hour to process one unit of alcohol – so if you have two drinks, for example, it will take two hours for your body to metabolise it. Therefore, if you want to ensure you get a better night's sleep, you should stop drinking a few hours before you go to bed.

Ways to Avoid Excessive Drinking

While it may help to combat all the extra holiday-related stress, consuming alcohol can often make the problem worse – especially if it means you're not getting enough good sleep. And with everyone around you continually reaching for (and offering you) another drink, it can be hard to say no.

To cut down, the key is to make sure you won't feel like you're missing out. Make sure you've got some suitable and equally tempting alternatives – there are some excellent non- and low-alcohol alternatives on the market, so stock up on those. Other ways you can avoid over-indulging include:

- Alternate alcoholic drinks with water or non-alcoholic options, and always measure spirits – don't free pour.
- Plan a couple of days in advance to be 'alcohol-free days'. Have your alternatives ready in the fridge so you're not tempted to 'try again tomorrow'.
- Have some fun creating colourful mocktails.
- Let your family and friends know that you're cutting down. That way they can support you, and might even choose to join you!
- Use apps such as MyDrinkAware to track how much you're drinking and let you know when you've reached your daily limit.
- If you're heading out, go for smaller sizes – choose the smallest option for a glass of wine, ask for single measures or drink bottled beer instead of pints.

How Alcohol Affects Sleep Apnoea and Snoring

Sleep apnoea is a condition in which a person experiences a temporary loss of breath while they sleep, which may or may not cause them to wake up. There are two types. Central sleep apnoea (CSA) is when the brain does not signal to the muscles that control breathing properly, and obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) is caused by physical blockages in the back of the throat. These episodes decrease overall sleep quality by reducing the amount of oxygen entering the bloodstream.

Drinking alcohol can exacerbate these symptoms, as it causes the throat muscles to relax and block the airways. Many studies have linked excessive alcohol intake with sleep disturbances. One, for example, found that drinking alcohol increases the risk of sleep apnoea by 25%. It can also lead to excessive and loud snoring, regardless of whether the snorer has sleep apnoea or not. So, if you know you suffer from sleep apnoea, or are prone to snoring, reducing your alcohol intake could mean a better night's sleep for everyone.

How to Sleep Better

One way to sleep better is to manage your stress, so you're not tempted to reach for more alcohol to help you relax. This time of year, when we're super-busy, is often when our self-care routines tend to slide – but it's more important than ever to keep them up. Whatever that is for you, setting aside even 10 or 15 minutes for yourself each day will make a significant difference.

If it won't prevent you from sleeping at night, you might want to incorporate a nap into your daily schedule. Having a supportive recliner chair is a great way to snatch forty winks or to rest your legs for a bit. At night, having a good quality bed and mattress will also make a world of difference. An adjustable bed that allows you to raise your head can ease symptoms of sleep apnoea and snoring (not to mention indigestion), while a memory foam or pocket sprung mattress will make you feel fully supported and relaxed, allowing you to wake up feeling ready to face another busy day.

The Bottom Line

Alcohol is ingrained within our culture as being a go-to solution for a celebration, commiseration or to take on boredom. But in reality those extra tipples are not our friends... they actually cause us to sleep badly and feel even worse the next day.

A good night's sleep means we have more energy, more patience and more brainpower – just what we need to enjoy this time of year as we will the days to become longer and the weather to turn warmer.

One easy way to get better sleep is to cut down on our alcohol intake... and fortunately, there is plenty of advice and lots of alternative options out there.

Another way to improve sleep is a superior quality, adjustable bed from the Mobility Furniture Company, which can not only help us sleep more comfortably, but reduce the instances of snoring and obstructive sleep apnoea which often keep us – and our partners – awake. Now that's worth raising a glass to (or even a mug of tea)!



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