

Alcohol can be a diet-buster

BY J.M. HIRSCH
Associated Press Writer

You know drinking and driving is bad, but what about drinking and dieting?

A drink now and then probably won't leave you with a holiday belly, but too many six-packs is not the way to six-pack abs.

Before you imbibe, consider this: During this season of indulgence, you already eat more than normal. Washing down those treats with beer or bubbly ups an already high calorie count.

The good news is that the same advice that keeps you safe on the road also can make it safer to step on the scale.

Federal dietary guidelines limit alcohol to one serving a day for women, two for men. But it's easy to overdo.

A 12-ounce serving (a standard bottle) of beer has about 150 calories. Light beers and 1½-ounce shots of hard alcohol have about 100 calories. A 3½-ounce glass of wine has about 75 calories. A 12-ounce wine cooler has 180 calories, and 1½ ounces of most liqueurs have 160 or more.

But drinking just a serving or two can be difficult. Wine often is served in 6-ounce or larger glasses. And if you prefer your beer on tap, realize that a pint of brew holds 16 ounces.

Complicating the issue is a tendency by people to treat beverage calories differently than those from food, thinking somehow that the glass of cabernet sauvignon

doesn't count as much as the pasta with carbonara.

But calories are calories, and when too many are consumed the body turns them into fat, regardless of the source, says Yale University obesity researcher Kelly Brownell.

Studies also suggest that people who consume too many calories from beverages are less likely to compensate by cutting back elsewhere in their diet than those who overeat food.

Drinking also sabotages diets through the munch factor, says Elisabetta Politi, nutrition manager at Duke University's Diet and Fitness Center. Alcohol lowers inhibitions, which makes the cheese platter and mixed nuts that much more attractive.

Politi says the simpler the drink the better. Wines, beer and spirits are best. Mixed drinks, such as a margarita or punch, can have 500 calories per serving, or roughly a third of the total calories a woman should consume in a day.

If you're watching your carbs, fermentation and distillation make hard alcohol, such as vodka, rum, gin and whiskey, a great choice. These drinks have little or no sugar, and that means no carbohydrates.

White wines average about 1 gram of carbohydrates per serving, reds about 2 grams. Sweet dessert wines pack 12 grams.

As for beer, light varieties have about 5 grams of carbohydrates, while low-carb beers can have as few as 3

grams. Regular beers have about 13 grams.

Whatever you drink, don't do it on an empty stomach. Alcohol is absorbed faster when there is no food in your system. While a fast buzz might be fun, it also lowers your inhibitions, making you more likely to overeat and overdrink.

Once you start drinking, alternate between water — or go wild with seltzer and a splash of juice and alcohol. This not only cuts your calories for the evening, it also helps ward off a hangover by keeping you hydrated.

Also consider lighter versions of your favorites. Low-and-no-fat eggnog is an easy substitute that can chop hundreds of calories. Switching to diet in your rum and Coke can cut the calories in half.

Inexpensive wine becomes a spritzer when spruced up with seltzer water.

And if you're drinking at a restaurant, resist the urge to buy a bottle of wine. Though it's more expensive to buy by the glass, you probably will drink less and there is no pressure to finish the bottle.

Ultimately, the focus should be on pleasure, says Brownell. Pick a drink you enjoy, have just one and drink it slowly.

"Make your calories count. Whether eating food or drinking alcohol, make sure that the calories are really enjoyable," he said. "If you're drinking rapidly, the pleasure of the alcohol will go down because you're not savoring what you drink."

Embrace that faraway parking spot at the mall — it'll help burn calories

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Hankering for another slice of fruitcake? Hoping it doesn't go to your hips? Better start twiddling your thumbs, tapping your feet and talking with your hands.

That's because fidgeting burns calories — as many as several hundred a day. And since you probably won't eat fewer treats during the holidays, it's time to start thinking about how you're going to move more.

We're not talking about extra trips to the gym, and nobody expects you to get buff by January. But add some effort to your daily routine and you might also be able to add that second slice of fruitcake.

One reason so many people gain weight this time of year is that they focus only on what not to eat while ignoring what they should be doing — anything that ups their physical activity.

Something as simple as a 10-minute walk — even at the mall — can burn as much as 100 calories. And researchers have found that people who remain active during the holidays are the least likely to gain weight.

"That suggests you can get away with eating the way you want to if you continue exercising," said Amy O'Connor, deputy editor of Prevention magazine. "The

problem is you stop exercising and you overeat."

Take it one step at a time, literally, says Ann Yelmokas McDermott, a nutrition scientist at Tufts University. Park your car at the far end of the lot, skip the elevator, and carry your bundles to the car — it's cardio- and weight-training in one.

And even though your shopping schedule may be squeezing your workouts, she urges you to keep your date with the gym. Even shortened workouts are better than sitting in front of the television.

Changing around your usual fitness routine can help, too. If you normally use a stationary bike at the gym, instead be a bit more seasonal — pack up the kids, rent some skates and head to the rink.

Even buying a Christmas tree can be a workout. Most farms that let you cut your own require you to tromp through the woods in search of that perfect evergreen. Nothing like a hike on a cold day to burn calories.

Dr. Robert Kushner, a professor of medicine at Northwestern University, encourages people to use the increasingly ubiquitous pedometer to track their daily steps and motivate them to take more.

"It gives people a sense of control on how to burn calo-

ries," he said.

O'Connor's favorite suggestion for getting motivated to get moving is a daily look in the mirror. Naked.

Mike Ryan, a spokesman and trainer for Gold's Gym, thinks of holiday fitness as part of a contract with yourself. Sort out in advance how you will behave (including indulgences) and how you will deal with that.

Make the contract specific. For example, decide that for each slice of pie you will do two laps around the block or 30 minutes of fast-paced shopping at the mall. This lets you indulge without guilt because you have a plan for dealing with it.

But make sure your contract doesn't contain the I'll-wait-until-January clause. Ryan says few things doom a diet like a month or two of no-holds-barred eating.

It also helps to think of food in terms of activity. Equate treats with the effort needed to burn them off and you might be less tempted to indulge. Or you'll at least know what's in store for you tomorrow.

Want a slice of pumpkin pie? Feel like swimming for 50 minutes? A sugar cookie is easy — 20 minutes of yoga should do the trick. But a cup of stuffing will have you shoveling snow for 40 minutes.

And the fruitcake? Shopping for two hours.

Resolutions

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Practicing yoga may also help heal maladies of the mind by helping to build a reservoir of hope and strength.

"It's there for you when times are tough," Robold said. "It gives you more inner strength to activate your will power."

Go Figure: 2915 Garfield Ave., TC; 946-0810.

Fit For You: 1226 Garfield Ave., TC; 922-7285.

Yoga For Health: 1200 West Eleventh, TC; 922-9642; www.yogaforhealthtc.com.

Spiritual Searching

The Higher Self Book Store's myriad offerings, including classes, discussion groups and guest speakers, cater to those with a feeling that "something is missing" in life, said owner Ricki Blanchard, coupled with the realization that traditional offerings aren't filling the void.

Not just a place to buy

books, this is more of a spiritual resource center that focuses on both traditional and non-traditional realms.

"I know people want to know what the year holds for them," Blanchard said, so she has organized a Psychic Fair scheduled for Jan. 7 to assist people in finding the preview they are seeking around the start of the New Year.

"Usually readings will leave people with a confirmation that they know what to do now," Blanchard said.

Higher Self Book Store: 328 E. Front St., TC; 941-5805; www.higherselfbookstore.com.

Lisa Gruber is a local freelance writer.



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Left, co-owner Karen Waslawski uses some of the new equipment at Go Figure Fitness & Tanning For Women.

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