



Do Alcohol Calories Slow Weight Loss?

According to conventional wisdom, the infamous "beer belly" is caused by excess alcohol calories being stored as fat.

There are also plenty of people who point the finger at alcohol when it comes to their weight loss slowing down, or even coming to a halt completely.

Can you go out on a Friday and Saturday night, enjoy a few drinks AND lose weight at the same time? Or is living like a monk the only way to get the body you want?

Alcohol calories

Alcohol is labeled as containing 7.1 calories per gram. But the real value is slightly lower. That's because alcohol elicits a thermogenic response, which means it raises your metabolic rate for some time after you drink it.

Once this rise in metabolism is taken into account, the "true" number of calories in a gram of alcohol is somewhere between 5.7 and 6 calories [2, 6].

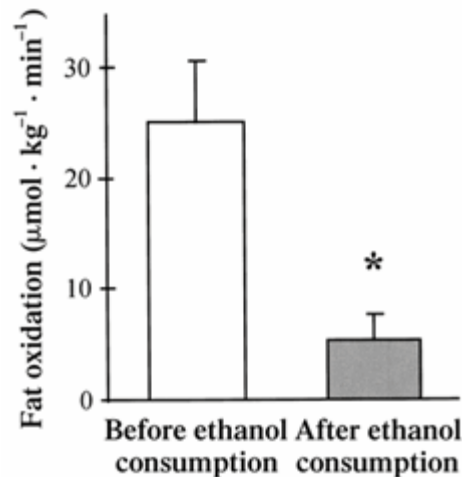
Whether or not alcohol is "fattening" is a very controversial subject, mainly because the main fate of alcohol is NOT to be stored as fat. In fact, less than 5% of the alcohol calories you drink are turned into fat. Rather, the main effect of alcohol is to reduce the amount of fat your body burns for energy.

Some evidence for this comes from research carried in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* [4].

Eight men were given two drinks of vodka and sugar-free lemonade separated by 30 minutes. Each drink contained just under 90 calories.

For several hours after drinking the vodka, whole body lipid oxidation (a measure of how much fat your body is burning) dropped by a massive 73%.

You can see this for yourself in the figure below, which shows fat burning before (on the left) and after (on the right) alcohol consumption.



Rather than getting stored as fat, the main fate of alcohol is conversion into a substance called acetate.

In fact, blood levels of acetate after drinking the vodka were 2.5 times higher than normal. And it's this sharp rise in acetate that puts the brakes on fat loss.

To summarize and review, here's what happens to fat metabolism after the odd drink or two.

- A small portion of the alcohol is converted into fat. Of the 24 grams of alcohol consumed in this study, roughly 3% was turned into fat.
- Your liver then converts most of the alcohol into acetate.
- The acetate is released into your bloodstream and takes precedence over the metabolism of protein, carbohydrate, and fat.

The way your body responds to alcohol is very similar to the way it deals with excess carbohydrate.

Although carbohydrate can be converted directly into fat, this doesn't happen unless you're eating massive amounts of carbohydrate.

Instead, one of the main effects of overfeeding with carbohydrate is that it simply *replaces* fat as a source of energy. By suppressing fat burning, it enables the fat in your diet to be stored a lot more easily.

It's important to point out that alcohol is only having this effect while it's being metabolized by your body.

When researchers have looked at the effect of alcohol calories over an entire day, rather than just for a few hours, they find that alcohol increases fat storage only when you take in more calories than you burn off [1].

So if you drink and take more calories than you burn off, you're more likely to store the fat from the food you're eating because your body is getting all its energy from the acetate in the drink.

The reason that alcohol has such a bad reputation when it comes to weight loss has more to do with the fact that it acts as a potent appetizer than anything else.

In other words, you'll eat more food if a meal is served with an alcoholic drink than you would if that same meal was served with a soft drink [5, 8].

So you get hit twice — once from the calories in the alcoholic drink, and then again from the subsequent increase in appetite and calorie intake.

Let's cut to the chase. Can you drink alcohol and still lose weight?

The answer to this question is a definite yes, just as long as you're sensible about it.

In one German study, 49 overweight subjects were assigned to one of two 1500-calorie diets [7]. The first diet included a glass of white wine every day and the other a glass of grape juice.

The wine group actually lost slightly more weight — 10.4 pounds versus 8.3 pounds in the grape juice group — although this wasn't a statistically significant difference.

Obviously there's a balance to be struck. You don't need to cut alcohol out completely, but if you're trying to lose weight, cutting your intake in half is a good place to start.

The simple way to do this is alternate whatever you're drinking with water or some other low-calorie drink. So you'd have a cocktail... then a glass of water... then a cocktail... and so on. If you drink a glass or two of wine every night, try drinking every other night instead.

In summary, the idea that alcohol automatically turns into fat and goes straight to your waist is mistaken. Alcohol does put the brakes on fat burning while it's being metabolized by your body. But it won't cause fat gain by itself, and is no more likely to put the brakes on weight loss than excess calories from carbohydrate or fat.

About the Author

[Christian Finn](#) holds a master's degree in exercise science, is a certified personal trainer and has been featured on BBC TV and radio, as well as in Men's Health, Men's Fitness, Muscle & Fitness, Fit Pro, Zest and other popular fitness magazines.



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