

Alcohol and sleep

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I often find that, if I have been drinking, I sleep badly and wake early or wake feeling less rested. Why is this?

This is a common problem. Though many people associate alcohol with promoting sleep, due to its sedative properties, the effects of alcohol upon chemicals in the brain mean that you are more likely to have a fitful night's sleep that is far from optimal..

When you consume alcohol close to bedtime, it will suppress the first REM (vivid dream) stage of sleep and send you straight into deep sleep which is usually the second stage of the sleep process. Often with heavy alcohol use this crash resembles passing out.

As long as the body registers that a metabolic poison is in your system, you will not be able to pass into REM sleep phase. This is the most critical phase of sleep that allows our brain to reboot or recover. It is only about 1 ½ - 2 ½ hours of REM in 8 hours of sleep or in an entire 24 hours of daily activity. It is critical that you get maximal REM or your brain and CNS is greatly fatigued upon awakening. An athlete must also remember that your brain controls every aspect of physical performance including the impulses sent to muscle.

Once the body has metabolized all the alcohol from your system, this suppressed REM stage kicks in, normally much earlier than it should. Since you wake much more easily from REM sleep, you can find yourself waking after only 4 or 5 hours of slumber, and you may not be able to get back to sleep. This sleeplessness disturbs the overall quality of the CNS rest.

Also, while normal sleep usually involves 6-7 cycles of REM sleep, adding up to 1 ½ - 2 ½ hours total of brain/CNS rest, (this enables you to wake feeling refreshed) someone who has been drinking will typically only have 1-2 cycles, or none if one drinks to intoxication. This means you wake up feeling as if you had never slept at all. Good luck trying to train or compete. It will be less than optimal.

The best advice when trying to avoid sleep related problems or be at your best is to refrain from using alcohol.