

In the drink

It's the season to be merry. But how 'merry'? Dr Douglas Carnall looks at alcohol and cycling

Ah yes! Alcohol. Our favourite drug. Cheap, widely available, and embedded in our culture since ancient times, it can often be hard to avoid. Alcohol's beneficial effects include relaxation and heightened sociability in small doses of 1-2 units.

Alcohol works on the frontal parts of the brain, reducing the inhibitions programmed there by family and society, releasing one from worldly care for an hour or two. In the pleasant company of our similarly inclined fellows, what's not to like? What's more, the flavanoid molecules in wine and beer are natural antioxidants, which have the beneficial effect of preventing hardening of the arteries and clotting within them (thrombosis).

ONE TOO MANY

I'm afraid that's about where the good things end. Most obviously, cycling under the influence of alcohol increases the risk of physical injury due to trauma: we've probably all got an anecdote or two we could tell about someone unwise enough to get on a bike after a skinful; the fact that it tends to be late at night in the dark doesn't help either. Alcohol is particularly

dangerous because it both decreases coordination and heightens confidence at the same time.

The result: a sorry catalogue of avoidable injury. Morally I suppose drunk-cycling is a lesser evil than drunk-driving in that the person you're most likely to kill or injure is yourself, but you can't be sure even of that, and society foots the bill for your treatment. Go easy! In the pub, and on your bike after.

The nasty and tricky thing about alcohol is it disinhibits the part of the brain that might otherwise be responsible for inhibiting alcohol use, which is why dependence on alcohol is difficult to escape from. Drinking more than 1 or 2 units/day doesn't really increase the social and psychological benefits much, and starts to increase the risk of adverse effects considerably. More than 4 units (only a couple of pints of normal strength beer) in a session increases blood pressure, decreases



white cell and immune function, interferes with sleep and therefore growth hormone production (necessary for muscle repair) and results in depressed mood the next day. Higher doses still cause frank damage to the lining of the intestinal tract, and chronic heavy use can permanently damage the brain and liver.

HOW MUCH?

If you're an athlete – in other words, serious about riding your bike faster than the competition – alcohol therefore has no place in your training programme. The beneficial effects of the flavanoids can be obtained from other fruits and vegetables, and you'll have to rely on a surge of post-training endorphins if you want to party in a relaxed fashion. Alcohol inhibits testosterone production, which will decrease physical performance directly and ability in training thereafter.

For the rest of us – who like to ride our bikes because we like to ride our bikes – some middle path must be found. Yes, we'd like to be sociable, but does the additional pleasure of those third and fourth pints, or of draining the bottle of wine really outweigh the inevitably sluggish feeling on the bike for the whole of the next day? Probably not.

The social pressure to take the same dose of alcohol as everyone else can be very strong: try alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks if you're stuck in a round with heavier drinkers than yourself. If you ride to the pub, rehydrate first with water, then treat the beer as the icing on the cake that it is. And if you like a glass of wine in the evening, get some Vacu Vin reusable corks, so that it really is a glass, and not the bottle. Or (thanks Nigella!) you can freeze the leftovers and use them later in cooking.

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KNOW YOUR LIMITS

1 unit of alcohol = 10grams of ethanol. In terms of drinks, one unit equates to:

Drink	Strength	Volume	At the bar
Beer	4%	250mls	Just under 1/2 pint
Beer	5%	200mls	Just over 1/3 pint
Wine	12%	83mls	Half a normal glass
Spirits	40%	25mls	A single measure