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# 3 Things Varsity Athletes Need to Know about Alcohol

Most athletes know never to drink before a meet or game, but to what extent is alcohol use preventing you from reaching your fullest potential, and your team from achieving its goals? Here are three things to consider:

## **ONE: Alcohol impairs the development of muscle.**

During a normal night of sleep, your body naturally releases Human Growth Hormone, which is the hormone that signals muscles to grow and repair. When athletes take synthetic hormones to build muscle, it is typically the same amount that their body would naturally release during a normal night of sleep. This means that the single best thing you could do for muscle development is get a good night's sleep.

If you go to sleep intoxicated, your sleep cycle will be impaired, which means your body will release up to 70% less Human Growth Hormone. Even if you only drink in the off-season, you will significantly impair your body's ability to build muscle. Additionally, drinking after a game or a meet is problematic because your body needs quality sleep in order to help muscles repair from any injuries sustained during competition.

## **TWO: Alcohol consumed on a single night can influence athletic performance for several days afterwards.**

It is not just the release of Human Growth Hormone that is compromised by going to sleep intoxicated. Generally, the more intoxicated an individual is when he or she goes to sleep, the more sleep is disturbed; and the more sleep is disturbed, the greater the impact on physical performance. The effects from alcohol-induced sleep disturbance may include not feeling as "sharp" or as quick (i.e., impaired reaction time) and reduced physical endurance. After a night of alcohol-impaired sleep, it may take your body two nights to get back on track. This means that one night of drinking can impact three days of practice.

Another problem resulting from alcohol's impact on sleep is that the weakened sleep state impairs the formation and storage of memory. During REM sleep, important memories are stored and the neurotransmitters essential for learning and memory are replenished. Alcohol



Consider the impact of alcohol on your body & on your team.

impairs REM sleep which in turn may prevent you from learning and retaining new skills. This is particularly problematic during the off-season (a time when athletes tend to drink more), when one is developing muscle memory and trying to learn new plays and strategies.

## **THREE: Stupid stuff can happen when drinking alcohol and that stuff can impact the whole team.**

Let's face it, rational thinking is the first thing that becomes impaired after a few drinks and, every so often, this leads to significant harm. Because athletes are visible members of the community, one player's problem after drinking, like an assault or fight, reflects badly on the whole team. Even something as simple as spraining your ankle while drunk impacts the entire team.

So... consider this:

- You can increase your team's success in competition by not drinking in-season.
- You can improve strength and performance in the off-season by not drinking.
- If you do drink alcohol after a period of not drinking, be sure to go easy, because your tolerance may have decreased significantly.

## **Got questions?**

Cornell Health offers services for students who want to learn more about their own use of alcohol and/or other drugs, reduce or eliminate their use, or are worried about a friend or family member's use. In addition, the campus and Ithaca community are home to several self-help groups and treatment facilities. Learn more about these services at [health.cornell.edu](http://health.cornell.edu) [search "alcohol"] or call 607-255-5155.

