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This Is Your Body On Dry January

There are benefits to banishing the booze.

Ashley Davidson On Assignment For HuffPost

In recent years, Dry January has become increasingly popular, with more and more people accepting the challenge to go booze-free for the entire month. It's turned into something of a movement, with millions of participants worldwide every year. (There's even an app to help people stay on track.)

"Many people flock to dry January as part of this 'new year, new me' mentality," Leigh Winters, a neuroscientist and holistic wellness expert, told HuffPost in an email. "I presume that some people are coming off a drinking bender — feeling like they enjoyed a little too much wine or beer over the holiday season. And for those who don't abuse alcohol, it seems like an obtainable and easy New Year's resolution that can put you on the path to better health."

Making it through Dry January is a significant accomplishment for many, but how does a month of no alcohol actually affect your body? We talked to several health experts and past participants to find out. Take a look at some of the potential benefits below:

Your skin will look and feel better.



Alcohol dehydrates not only your body, but also your skin, said Debra Jaliman, a board-certified dermatologist and assistant professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

If you're an excessive drinker, you can develop a zinc deficiency, which can cause a histamine reaction that leads to facial redness and flushing, or rosacea, Jaliman said. Research shows that alcohol consumption is linked to a higher risk of rosacea in women. During Dry January, you may start to notice your skin looks and feels better — but once you start drinking again, Jaliman said, alcohol will start to have a dehydrating effect within weeks.

If and when you do start to drink again, Jaliman suggests drinking clear liquor like vodka. “It won't trigger rosacea,” she said.

You might lose weight.

It's not surprising that alcoholic beverages contain empty calories. But Shauna Faulisi, founder of a Los Angeles-based wellness coaching service, explained that when you drink, the first thing your body metabolizes is the alcohol itself.

“This means that all fat-burning will temporarily be put on hold,” she said, adding that consuming alcohol with a sugar-heavy mixer (think margaritas or a rum and Coke) adds even more unnecessary calories and has a negative effect on blood sugar. “When we have excess insulin in our blood, it can lead to a host of issues, including weight gain.”

Research suggests that people who binge on alcohol at least once a month are more likely to be overweight. And anecdotally speaking, many who've participated in the January challenge say they noticed a drop in pounds.

Just beware of the sugar crash: Faulisi notes that anyone participating in Dry January may experience cravings for sweets. She suggested filling that void with fats like extra virgin olive oil, coconut oil and avocado, as well as “above-ground” veggies like broccoli, asparagus and cauliflower, to help keep blood sugar levels in check.

You'll get better Zs.



No more nightcaps. “Cutting back or eliminating alcohol can dramatically improve your sleep,” said Marc Milstein, a brain health researcher whose work focuses on the science of sleep.

Milstein explained that alcohol destroys a brain stimulant called glutamate that helps keep you awake. However, when the brain notices this stimulant has been destroyed by alcohol, it starts making more.

“This usually happens in the middle of the night,” he said, “and that making of the glutamate stimulant then wakes you up and ruins your night’s sleep.”

You may have more energy.

Sacha Cohen, founder of a Washington, D.C.-based public relations company, plans to participate in Dry January for the fourth year this month. The 48-year-old said the biggest benefit she’s experienced is weight loss, but she’s also noticed she has significantly more energy.

“In the mornings, I’m more apt to jump out of bed than slowly get up,” she said. “My focus is better. I just feel more upbeat.”

You might even feel like a “well-oiled machine.”



Adriane Abraham, a certified personal trainer and CEO of a Florida fitness studio, considers alcohol consumption akin to not taking care of your car.

“Your body is your vehicle,” she explained. “Drinking is empty calories [and like] running your vehicle on a spare tire. You’re going to be slower in general. You’re not going to function like that well-oiled machine. Taking 30 days off of drinking is going to show a person that hasn’t done this how well they’re going to feel.”

And your mental health may improve.

Sometimes, after a stressful day, it just seems natural to grab a beer or a glass of wine to take the edge off. But research shows that alcohol can actually exacerbate anxiety in some cases. In the short term, alcohol’s depressant effect can make you feel better. Long-term, however, heavy drinking can lead to a host of medical and psychological problems, according to the National Institutes of Health’s National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. So giving up alcohol for a month — or longer, in some cases — may have some positive effects on your mental health.

Ready to go dry?



There are clearly benefits to going alcohol-free, even if just for a short period. Lori Cheek, founder and CEO of the dating app Cheekd, has made Dry January an annual tradition, and loves it so much that she also goes dry for two weeks in August.

“I do it every year and have so many stories,” Cheek, 45, said in an email. “I’ve become a pro at it and by the end of January I’ve lost about 10-12 pounds, have saved so much money, feel so alive, and my apartment [is] always spotless. Instead of heading to happy hour after work, I take myself to the movies and I work out twice as much. I’ve gotten other people on board to do it with me, so it makes it even easier when you’re doing it with friends.”

However, **Adam Splaver, a cardiologist in Hollywood, Florida**, advises heavy drinkers and those who may have a dependency issue to talk with their doctors about their options. (For people in this group, the side effects of not drinking can include shakes, hallucinations, palpitations and high blood pressure, **Splaver** explained.) And if you feel like you have a substance use issue, you may also want to consider reaching out to resources like [the NIAAA](#).

Ultimately, for social drinkers, giving up alcohol for the month can do wonders for your overall health.

“I encourage people to try Dry January if they’ve become social drinkers who are mindless about how much they actually consume,” Winters, the neuroscientist, said. “If you sit down and think to yourself, ‘how much and how often have I drank in the past month?’ and you’re unhappy or shocked by the true answer, going cold turkey is just one way to begin making more mindful and informed drinking decisions in the future.”

Need help with substance abuse or mental health issues? In the U.S., call 800-662-HELP (4357) for the SAMHSA National Helpline.

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