The Truth About Booze: How Alcohol Really Affects your Body [C2]

È la droga legale più consumata e accettata, un lubrificante sociale di innegabile importanza storica e culturale. Malgrado gli innumerevoli studi scientifici e gli evidenti effetti negativi sulla salute, ci sono ancora svariati miti da smentire e dati da verificare.

Birds do it, when they eat **berries** that have fermented in the first **frost**. Bees do it, when they suck on tree **sap**, and “many kinds of monkeys”, noted Charles Darwin in The Descent of Man, “**have a strong taste for** spirituous liquors.” There is evidence that humans were **brewing** their own **booze** even before the wheel **caught on**, but how much do we know about how it works on our brains and bodies? Well, quite a bit. Recent decades have seen dozens of studies validate some old **sayings**, **debunk** others, and give the medical establishment a much clearer understanding of how alcohol affects us and how much it is really OK to drink. You may have noticed that the effects of your first drink **kick in** almost as soon as it hits your mouth, but that may be more to do with your expectations than the alcohol itself. “Most people, the first time they drink, find it horrible,” says Professor David Nutt, the **chair** of Drug Science, an independent UK scientific body researching

drugs and alcohol. “But, eventually, they come to associate the smell and taste of their favourite drink with the effect in the brain and the pleasure that’s coming.”

THE FIRST SIP

From the mouth and **gullet**, the liquid moves to your stomach, where about 20 per cent is absorbed through the **stomach lining**. The rest is absorbed once it reaches the **small intestines**, all of it ultimately ending up in your **bloodstream**. Food can act like a sponge and slow the alcohol’s absorption: if you are drinking on an empty stomach, few minutes after your first **sip**, once it gets to your **bloodstream** and into your brain, it starts to have an effect.

THE SESSION

As you keep drinking, dopamine kicks in. This is the ‘**seeking** hormone’ that is often associated with the **drive** to do things, rewarding us with a little feelgood **spike** whenever we think about it. Alcohol affects the prefrontal cortex, which primarily governs cognitive control, impulse behaviour and the brain’s memory centre. This means that your judgment becomes **impaired** and movement is disrupted. If you drink too much, your **liver** starts to feel the strain. “On average, the **liver** can only metabolise, or **break down**, **roughly** one small glass of wine or a pint of beer an hour,” says nutritionist Hannah Macey. “When more than this is consumed, your **liver** becomes unable to deal with the workload so it begins to send alcohol to the heart. This leads to a fall in your blood pressure, while the newly alcohol-rich blood is now **pumped** to the lungs.” This means that you exhale some of your **intake**, which, of course, is how **Breathalyser tests** work.

THE MORNING AFTER

While there is no single commonly accepted cause of **hangovers**, several bad things tend to happen in combination after a big night out. “Dehydration is common,” says Macey. “But alcohol can also irritate the **stomach lining**, potentially causing diarrhoea, vomiting and an imbalance of electrolytes

including sodium, potassium and magnesium, which the body needs to function well. Together with **blood vessels** in the brain expanding, this can all cause a **thumping** headache." It is not just the headache: **overdoing** it inhibits the **liver**'s normal ability to release sugar, leading to the **sluggish** feeling that comes with low blood sugar levels. The body also reacts to what it perceives as an imbalance in brain chemicals, and tries to correct it by reducing **Gaba** , our main inhibitory neurotransmitter, — which can cause what many drinkers think of as "**hangxiety**". Finally, even one drink w**ill** negatively affect sleep, and having a few means you are unlikely to have had much beneficial sleep. The **fix**? It is everything you know you should do, but don't: eat before you start boozing to slow the absorption of alcohol into the blood, and drink plenty of water before, during and after drinking. The morning after, take an electrolyte supplement to replace what you have lost, eat anti-inflammatory foods containing omega-3 fatty acids. For a slightly more **kill**-or-cure option, a cold shower might help.

THE MEDIUM TERM

The **ill** effects mentioned above can **build up**, leaving you overstressed, **short on sleep**, and with high blood pressure. Regular consumption can cause permanent dilation of **blood vessels** and weight gain. As well as the significant calories **lurking** in alcoholic drinks, there is some evidence linking moderate consumption of alcohol to the buildup of visceral fat around the waist, associated with a number of health risks, including cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. Over the medium term, **booze** can also k**ill** off the helpful bacteria in your **gut** to an extent that can affect your immune system and mood, the latter enough to make you likely to drink more. "This can lead to a **hindered** immune response, negative **gut** symptoms and higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression," says Macey. "It also **plays havoc** with our hormones, which can lead to increased hunger and diminished **sexdrive**."

THE LONG HAUL

One of the better known health consequences of long-term alcohol consumption is **liver** disease. Although cirrhosis can take years to develop, regularly drinking over the recommended limits can damage the **liver**. Meanwhile, cutting down on drinking has become standard advice in lowering the risk of dementia. While alcohol doesn't appear to directly k**ill** brain cells, it can disrupt the growth of new ones — and also indirectly cause neurological problems that can lead to dementia. St**ill**, a glass of wine a day might help your longevity, right? Well, unfortunately, rumours of **booze**'s effectiveness in that area may have been exaggerated. It seems fairly clear that there is nothing in alcohol that is directly beneficial: resveratrol, an antioxidant often credited with health-boosting properties, is only present in minuscule amounts in red wine. Despite this, people who have a drink or two every week aren't necessarily likely to experience worse health **outcomes**. A recent meta-analysis that considered results from 107 studies found that, compared with never drinking, low-volume drinking is not associated with an increase in all-cause mortality. If you don't want **to give it up** entirely, perhaps the trick is to balance the (relatively) small health risks of low consumption against the fact that having a glass of red with some friends remains a lot nicer than the other health risks we are routinely exposed to. "Alcohol is the best drug for socialising that we know of," says Nutt. "And the whole history of humanity is socialising — we're an enormously social species and alcohol facilitates that. The problem is that about 10-15 per cent of people really struggle to control their drinking and quite a few people drink more than they should without knowing it." Nutt suggests two things. "First, you should be aware of how much you drink, in the same way you're aware of your weight and **waistline**, and try to reduce it if necessary." The second point may take some practice: "Never have a drink that doesn't **give you value**. Most people have one drink and carry on – but most of the value comes from that first drink."

Glossary

- **hindered** = contrastare
- **caught on** = prendere piede
- **bloodstream** = flusso sanguigno
- **spike** = picco
- **sayings** = detti
- **gullet** = esofago
- **break down** = scomporre
- **waistline** = vita
- **sap** = linfa
- **have a strong taste for** = essere molto goloso di
- **booze** = alcol
- **sluggish** = fiacco, intorpidito
- **give you value** = apportare valore
- **frost** = gelo
- **brewing** = preparare
- **small intestines** = intestino tenue
- **kill-or-cure** = rimedio estremo
- **short on sleep** = con deficit di sonno
- **lurking** = stare in agguato
- **outcomes** = conseguenze
- **chair** = presidente
- **thumping** = pulsante
- **hangxiety** = postumi di sbornia misti ad ansia
- **Gaba** = acido gamma aminobutirrico (gamma-aminobutyric acid)
- **gut** = intestino
- **plays havoc** = scombinare
- **berries** = bacche
- **kick in** = fare effetto
- **seeking** = cercare
- **intake** = consumo
- **hangovers** = postumi di sbornia
- **fix** = soluzione
- **sex drive** = libido

- **sip** = sorso
- **overdoing** = eccedere
- **build up** = accumularsi
- **impaired** = alterare
- **liver** = fegato
- **roughly** = all’incirca
- **pumped** = pompare
- **Breathalyser tests** = test di alcolemia
- **debunk** = smentire
- **stomach lining** = pareti gastriche
- **drive** = impulso
- **blood vessels** = vasi sanguigni
- **ill** = dannosi
- **to give it up** = smettere