Alcohol and Sleep

Regular sleep is important for our health and wellbeing. It allows us to repair physical and psychological damage and function well in our waking lives. People who regularly have enough good-quality sleep are likely to learn better, recall information better, be better protected from physical and mental illness, and live longer, more fulfilled lives.

Drinking alcohol can disrupt the sleep cycle. It can change both the length and quality of our sleep.

People with sleep disorders should pay particular attention to how alcohol can affect their sleep and overall health.

Alcohol and the Physiology of Sleep

Alcohol depresses the central nervous system, which affects sleep in a variety of ways. It is often believed that alcohol promotes sleep. However, although alcohol is a sedative and may initially help people to fall asleep more quickly, overall it disturbs the sleep cycle and can make certain sleep problems worse, affecting how we feel and function during waking periods.

Alcohol and Sleep Disorders

Drinking alcohol can exacerbate certain sleep disorders, notably insomnia and obstructive sleep apnea.
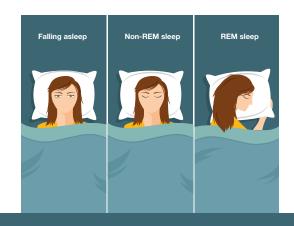
Insomnia

Insomnia may include the following symptoms: difficulty falling asleep, waking frequently during the night, difficulty falling asleep again after waking, waking too early and daytime sleepiness. People with insomnia sometimes use alcohol to self-medicate.

Studies have found that approximately 30% of people with ongoing insomnia have used alcohol within the past year as a sleep aid. Insomnia and alcohol abuse are strongly linked: estimates of the prevalence of insomnia in people with alcohol dependency range from 36% to 67%.

Because alcohol consumption can result in frequent waking and changes to the sleep cycle, it is likely that alcohol exacerbates insomnia and its use as a sleep aid is not recommended.

Falling asleep   **Non-REM sleep**   **REM sleep**

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Obstructive sleep apnea

Obstructive sleep apnea is a sleep disorder characterized by frequent pauses in breathing during sleep; these pauses, or apneas, usually last 10 to 30 seconds and may occur several times during the night.

Alcohol disrupts breathing during sleep by relaxing the throat muscles. Alcohol can also reduce the brain's ability to wake and detect a lack of oxygen in the body. This can lead to longer and more frequent breathing pauses. It is recommended that people with sleep apnea either avoid drinking alcohol altogether or at least cut back on their drinking.

Alcohol, Sleep and Daytime Function

Researchers have examined next-day performance and attentiveness in healthy people who drink alcohol before going to bed. The day after an episode of heavy drinking, participants' ability to accomplish divided-attention tasks was impaired and they scored lower on performance tests.

It is generally agreed that excessive drinking can indirectly affect next-day attentiveness or functioning because of the impact that alcohol has on the sleep cycle. While researchers usually observe only minor impairments, the impact can nonetheless be significant when the tasks involved are complex or dangerous. Studies have also documented the cumulative effect of alcohol and lack of sleep on attentiveness, judgment and motor function, and on the risk of falling asleep or having an accident while driving.

Conclusion

Alcohol is a sedative and may initially help people to fall asleep. Overall, however, it disturbs the sleep cycle and exacerbates certain sleep problems, leading to repercussions in our waking lives. Regular loss of sleep can affect our health and safety, brain function, mood and relationships with others.

For More Information

Alberta Health Services offers a wide range of addiction and mental health services. For individuals looking for help for themselves or for someone they care about, the addiction line is available 24 hours a day.

Addiction Helpline: 1-866-332-2322

For more detailed information on this topic and for other related information, go to the Alcohol and Health Series at albertahealthservices.ca