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DRY JANUARY

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MOST of us are familiar with the idea of Dry January — giving up alcohol for the month, often in an attempt to make up for the excesses of the Christmas period.

It's a concept popular with medical experts, who are warning that Britain is in the grip of an alcohol epidemic. More than ten million Britons drink to harmful levels, regularly exceeding the recommended maximum of 14 units a week (a medium glass of wine is two units, as is a pint of beer), according to a report last month by Public Health England.

And nearly two million of us are thought to be heavy drinkers — who are defined as having more than 35 units (or three-and-a-half bottles of wine) a week.

Exceeding limits is easily done — for example, a large glass of wine can equal a third of a bottle — and drinking at this level can leave you with more than just a hangover.

Not only is alcohol high in calories, but heavy drinking contributes to high blood pressure and cholesterol — and probably increases blood sugar levels by making the hormone insulin less effective at processing sugars, raising the risk of type 2 diabetes.

Plus as the liver breaks down alcohol, it produces toxins that damage cells, leading to inflammation and scarring.

Around 20 per cent of drinkers will develop liver problems that could ultimately prove fatal. Alcohol also increases the risk of cancers, strokes, dementia and heart disease.

Such is the concern about the numbers of people with liver damage that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) last month proposed that all heavy drinkers should have a scan to screen for liver disease.

But it's not just the liver that suffers, so too can your sleep, says Professor Kevin Moore, a liver specialist at the Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust. 'Regular drinkers often have impaired sleep because they are more likely to snore or wake more frequently during the night as a consequence of their poor breathing, or because they need to use the bathroom, leaving them with poor concentration during the day,' he says.

But is giving up alcohol for a month enough to undo this damage to your body? Experts believe so.

'Our recent research on people drinking an average of 35 units a week has shown that going dry for just one month decreases liver stiffness [a sign of liver damage] by 10-15 per cent and leads to significant reductions in weight, blood pressure, cholesterol and insulin resistance. So it is well worth it,' says Professor Moore.

To find out for ourselves, we asked five brave people who all drink over the official limit — most would be classed as heavy drinkers — to give up alcohol for a month.

They then had their weight, blood pressure and cholesterol levels checked and underwent various other blood tests before and after their alcohol-free month.

'Blood tests measuring levels of certain liver enzymes provide important information about how healthy the liver is,' says Professor Moore.

The volunteers also had an ultrasound scan of the liver, known as Fibroscan. This involves 'flicking' the organ with a vibration sent through the skin to see how the liver responds.

'A wobbly liver (with a score of less than seven) is healthy, while a stiffer liver, with a higher score, is a sign of damage, inflammation and scarring,' he adds.

Here, we reveal our volunteers' surprising results.

By **RACHEL ELLIS**

IT 'CURED' MY HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE



GORDON CHARLTON, 55, manager of a music publishing company, lives with his wife, Yvonne, 53, and his two children, Ollie, 19, and Emily, 22, in Biddenham, Bedford. He drinks between 60 and 70 units a week.

GORDON has a couple of pints of beer after leaving work, then a couple of glasses of wine at home. At a gig, he can drink three beers.

On Saturdays, he drinks four or five pints watching football and on Sundays he has wine with lunch.

He doesn't normally drink on Mondays and Tuesdays, and does a three-mile and five-mile run each week, a spinning class once a week and walks to and from the station.

RESULTS

Weight before: 18st 8lb (5ft 7in tall)
After: 18st 6lb

Liver stiffness before: 6.85 (borderline unhealthy)
After: 4.52 (normal)

Enzymes showing liver damage before: Two high, one healthy
After: Two high, one healthy

Blood pressure before: 144/92 (anything over 140/90 is high)
After: 134/80 (normal)

AT THE start of the experiment, a scan showed Gordon had the beginnings of fatty liver — a build-up of fat in the liver cells which can be caused by alcohol and can lead to scarring.

After a month without alcohol, his liver had improved and become less stiff, and his levels of the liver enzyme Gamma-glutamyl transferase (GGT) — released in the blood when the liver is damaged — reduced.

Before giving up alcohol, Gordon's levels were high at 57 (normal is less than 36), but they fell to 46. He also lost 2lb despite eating more and his blood pressure dropped from high to within the normal range.

PROFESSOR MOORE SAYS:

'MOST people of Gordon's weight will have a fatty liver. His saving grace is that he regularly works out — studies

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HEALTH



Yes, you'll lose weight and sleep better. But our volunteers' amazing lab results reveal the true health benefits of giving booze a break

Best exercise may protect the body against the harmful effects of alcohol mobilising fat in the liver. Although most of Gordon's other lab results were normal, the liver checks before the experiment suggested that drinking is starting to affect his body. However, once he stopped, both his liver stiffness and GGT dropped. These enzyme levels are still above normal, so it would be a good idea for him to cut down on alcohol. He had expected him to lose more weight but he came down with a cold so his limited his exercise.'

GORDON SAYS:
 'Over the past year, I have been making more regularly because of the pressure at work, and had thought myself looking forward to my next drink. Giving up alcohol wasn't that hard, although it included my birthday work Christmas party. Without doubt, I feel more on an even keel emotionally, have more energy, my concentration has improved. I have enjoyed not feeling groggy in the day — though I did substitute drink for ice cream. I'm thinking about giving up for six months.'

MY LIVER STARTED TO REPAIR ITSELF
AIMEE BRADLEY, 33, a naturopathy therapist, lives in Havant, Hampshire, with her husband, James, 33, and their 10-year-old daughter, Autumn. She drinks 70+ units a week.
 'I started drinking regularly after her mother died in 1999. At one point she was drinking

two to three bottles of wine — usually prosecco — a night. Now she drinks a bottle a night, but tries to have a couple of dry days a week. Over two years, Aimee has gained almost 4st through drinking. She does yoga daily at home.

RESULTS
Weight before: 14st 5lb (5ft 6in tall)
After: 14st
Liver stiffness before: 4.19 (normal)
After: 3.23 (normal)
Enzymes showing liver damage before: Two very high, one high
After: Three high
Blood pressure before: 112/74 (normal)
After: 118/78 (normal)

AIMEE'S levels of key liver enzymes were very high — her GGT was eight times the normal level for women, and her ALT four times the usual level — suggesting alcohol misuse. Her sleep quality was also poor. After the four weeks off alcohol, her GGT dropped by a third and her ALT level more than halved.

PROFESSOR MOORE SAYS:
 'I WAS surprised when I saw Aimee's initial ultrasound scan. She should by rights have a fatty liver, just by weight gain alone, and certainly with the amount of alcohol she consumes. However, the blood tests showed that alcohol is still having a significant impact on her liver health. When she stopped drinking, all liver enzymes decreased significantly, suggesting her liver was starting to repair. But the levels are still much higher than normal so I'd recommend she stays off alcohol, as she is at risk of developing cirrhosis (liver scarring). She should take up more exercise.'

AIMEE SAYS:
 'I'M terrified by the results. I lost my mum at 25 and want to make sure I'm around for Autumn. I found giving up alcohol hard — a couple of times I opened a bottle of wine just to sniff it. I ate more to compensate but still lost weight, and I felt less sluggish. Now I'll only drink on special occasions.'

I LOST WEIGHT AND FEEL HEALTHIER
SAM MITCHELL-INNES, 62, owner of a brand design consultancy, is divorced with two children — Kit, 30, and Phoebe, 26 — and lives in Ealing, West London. He drinks on average 25 to 40 units a week.

SAM drinks two glasses of red wine five days a week. He gives up alcohol for six weeks every Lent. Each day he cycles 22 miles and he sees a personal trainer once a week.

RESULTS
Weight before: 15st 11lb (6ft 2in tall)
After: 14st 13lb
Liver stiffness before: 4.8 (normal)
After: 3.9 (normal)
Enzymes showing liver damage before: One high, one borderline high, one healthy
After: Three healthy
Blood pressure before: 142/82 (high)
After: 134/78 (normal)
BEFORE the experiment, Sam's blood pressure was slightly high, as was his cholesterol at 5.6mmoles/litre

(less than 5 is considered ideal). There are two enzymes in the blood — aspartate transaminase (AST) and alanine transaminase (ALT) — which increase when the liver is inflamed or damaged. Sam's levels of these were higher than normal. After the experiment, Sam's blood pressure fell to within the normal range, and he lost 2lb. Most notably, his levels of AST more than halved, bringing it into the normal range, and his ALT also dropped from 27 to 21 (under 31 is considered healthy). His liver stiffness also reduced.

PROFESSOR MOORE SAYS:
 'SAM'S initial ALT and AST levels can be a sign of alcohol misuse or scarring of the liver, which could be caused by years of drinking. However, they can also be caused by muscle injury, which may be the reason in Sam's case as he cycles. Again, exercise seems to be protecting Sam. After giving up alcohol, all his liver function results were normal. This shows the benefits of giving up for a few weeks to allow the liver to recover.'

SAM SAYS:
 'MY concentration improved, I felt physically better particularly in the mornings and I started sleeping through to when my alarm clock rang. I am very impressed with the results. I now want to drink less frequently.'

SLEEP, SKIN AND MOOD IMPROVED

LUCY O'GRADY, 41, a carer for her autistic son, Stirling, 11, lives with her partner, Pietro, 32, in South London. She drinks 70+ units a week.

AFTER a bout of depression last year, brought on by family problems, Lucy turned to alcohol to unwind. She regularly drinks a bottle of red wine a night and often has a beer in the day. Lucy goes to the gym every other day.

RESULTS
Weight before: 9st 5lb (5ft 7in tall)
After: 9st 6lb
Liver stiffness before: 4.45 (normal)
After: 4.73 (normal)
Enzymes showing liver damage before: Three healthy
After: Three healthy
Blood pressure before: 118/72 (normal)
After: 110/70 (normal)

DESPITE her high alcohol intake, Lucy's test results were within normal levels. After four weeks alcohol-free, her sleep and concentration improved.

PROFESSOR MOORE SAYS:
 'LUCY drinks heavily by all definitions. I had expected to find abnormal liver function in the tests and was surprised that her results were good. Exercise may partly explain her good results — or she may simply have good genes. Importantly, giving up alcohol has challenged her psychological dependence on it.'

LUCY SAYS:
 'IT FELT as if something was missing when I didn't drink, I leant on alcohol for confidence. However, it was taking its toll on my skin and I didn't like how irritable it made me. I really didn't know if I could give it up — but I did and it helped me lose my taste for it. I slept better and felt fresher. It's been a really positive experience and I've also saved a lot of money — around £120.'

I CONCENTRATE FOR A LOT LONGER NOW
JOHN BROWNE, 36, a chef from Wembley, North London, is single with two children aged five and seven. He drinks 46 units a week.
 JOHN relaxes with a few beers after work. At

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