



7 Major Health Benefits of Dry January, According to Experts

When everyone has drunk all the spiked eggnog they can stand, and when everyone has sipped the last of the year's bubbly, you might hear more and more people saying they need a break from alcohol. Enter **Dry January**, where people avoid booze for the whole month.

“Dry January appeals to someone who may have noticed a pattern that they’re drinking a little bit more than they should, especially during the holidays,” says Michael Levy, Ph.D., a psychologist based in Florida and the author of *Take Control of Your Drinking and You May Not Need to Quit*.

If you’re someone who likes to relax after work with a glass of wine, know that you’re not alone. It’s a *very* common habit. “Alcohol hits the neurochemical pathways in our brain and releases endorphins that make us feel good,” Levy explains. A beer or a cocktail can temporarily provide a sense of ease and comfort, so it’s no wonder so many of us gravitate to the drink to unwind.

For women, a moderate consumption of alcohol is about one glass a day – no more than seven per week. Excessive drinking can lead to a slew of health issues, so holding back on alcohol for 31 days could launch you into 2020 with the right footing. You might find that you don’t need alcohol as much as you thought and you may reap some significant health benefits.

“You may feel so good that you decide, what was I drinking for to begin with?” says Amy Knoblock-Hahn, Ph.D., RD, a registered dietitian and health behavior expert at Whole Food Is Medicine in St. Louis.

Here are some ways practicing Dry January benefits your health:

You may be in a better mood.

It’s easy to think that a glass of wine really does perk you up and wash all the day’s worries away. And at first, it might. Over time though, if consuming alcohol has become a main coping strategy, it may be hiding underlying depression or anxiety, says Ashley Jones, APRN-CNP, a certified family nurse practitioner at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. “Alcohol tends to make these symptoms worse, so you may find that your mood is actually more stable when not consuming alcohol,” she says.

While Dry January won’t remedy an illness like depression, stepping back from your nightly *vino* can provide the distance you need to assess your motivation for drinking. When not self-medicating, you’ll be in a better position to recognize that you’re going through something that perhaps you need help with via a talk with your doctor, therapy, or other known natural mood lifters like exercise or spending time in nature. At the very least, Dry January can provide valuable insight as to why you’ve been regularly drinking.

You’ll sleep more soundly.

After a night of drinking, it’s usually pretty easy to fall asleep. But have you ever then woken up at 3 a.m. wide awake? That’s alcohol doing what it does best: ensuring your sleep is less than great. As the National

Sleep Foundation explains, levels of the sleep-inducing chemical adenosine rise to help you nod off, but it then crashes, waking you up. Even if your body doesn't try to rouse you for a middle-of-the-night party, it's likely you'll rise groggy anyway. Alcohol degrades sleep quality; drinking moderate or high amounts of alcohol decreases "restorative" REM sleep, according to a review in the journal *Alcoholism Clinical & Experimental Research*. Giving up drinking for a month may help you get sounder sleep, and better rest means more energy to devote to the things that matter in the start of the year. (Like that resolution to be more active.)

Your waistline may shrink.

Depending on how much you were drinking before (as well as your starting weight), it's possible you could lose a couple pounds per week, says Knoblock-Hahn. Not only do boozy beverages add calories, the type they add are liquid calories, which research shows don't fill you up the way food calories do. "Many times, when people stop or cut back on drinking, they don't replace those calories. You may find that just this one change helps you lose weight," she says. You may also be consuming more junk food when under the influence, as booze has been known to knock down your willpower when you get a case of the munchies.

You're saving money.

If you've been shelling out \$10-\$15 on the regular for fancy cocktails or pours of wine, you know that it adds up fast. Without the booze tab, buying dinner away from your kitchen sure becomes more affordable. And, while it's natural to feel like you'll be a fish out of water in social situations, chances are, you'll be able to handle it better than you think. Your friends won't pay too much mind if you're sipping a bubbly with lime, and the server will be happy as long as you over tip them when it's time to settle up.

Your skin might look brighter.

Alcohol is a known diuretic, which means it will cause you to pee more than if you just drank water. As a result, it's harder for the body to hydrate itself. Lack of hydration can lead to dry, lusterless skin. Alcohol has the potential to increase hormones like estrogen and cortisol, as well as spike your blood sugar (depending on how sweet you like your drinks). This is a recipe for breakouts. Research has shown that the toxins in alcohol can speed up your skin's aging process.

You'll have a stronger immune system.

Binge drinking (more than four drinks in a single occasion for women) may suppress your body's immune response. A 2015 study found that when healthy folks (who normally consume low or moderate levels of alcohol) had an episode of binge drinking, their immunity initially rose. However, two to five hours later, levels of disease-fighting immune cells (like NK and white blood cells) decreased. Researchers can't say how this may play out— as in, if it means you're more likely to be saddled with a cold or flu virus — but it's certainly not a good thing if your immune system is taking a break.

You'll have a new relationship with alcohol.

The benefit to breaking is showing yourself that you don't have to drink every day or even drink at all. "You may learn that you don't need it in your life," says Levy. If you do choose to drink again come February, the month off will also lower your tolerance, so you'll be able to get a buzz on less. For **Grace Atwood**, founder of TheStripe.com and co-host of Bad on Paper Podcast, Dry January changed her view of alcohol for the better. She did one in 2018 and a year later the momentum is going strong. "I no longer reach for that mindless glass of wine, and alcohol is more of a treat than a daily indulgence," she says.

Here's how to have a successful Dry January:

Break up your routine.

If you're used to going home and pouring a glass of red, you may feel a bit lost at the beginning of January when you go dry. "Drinking gets set off by the triggers in the environment," says Levy. You don't need to be gone all night. The idea is to get home at least after the "bewitching hour," says Levy, which for many people is 7 p.m. Once you break the automatic habit of drinking, it'll be easier to skip the glass

Shake up your routine and it will be easier. After work, run errands, go to the French class you've always wanted to take, or see a movie. Make non-drinking plans with friends; like bowling or outdoor frisbee at a park. You'll find that your evenings seem longer, and you'll feel sharper before you head to bed.

Recruit a friend to hold you accountable.

It's how now-pro Hilary Sheinbaum accomplished Dry January initially. She's tacked that advice at the top of her new guide to going sober, *The Dry Challenge*, set for a end of 2020 release. "This person (or group) will be there to keep you company as you look to partake in non-drinking activities, as you face similar feelings and potential obstacles, and if you need someone vent to," Sheinbaum tells *Good Housekeeping*. "On that note: they keep you accountable, too —you can even make a bet, like I did."

Start a new workout regimen.

Since drinking alcohol too often can leave you feeling tired and dehydrated, Dry January might be the best time to develop a new gym habit. Without the booze, you could feel a new surge of energy. And when you're working out several times a week, you might not want to reach for the bottle as often. You'll want to feel fresh and ready to go for the next time you hit the weights.

Start journaling before you begin.

If you're facing a particularly low moment, you can remind yourself easily of how it was a few days before — or during week one if you're more than halfway through the month. As an added benefit, Sheinbaum says this journal can also clearly illustrate how ditching alcohol has made life better for you afterwards. "Document everything from how your skin looks, to your mood and energy, to the hours of sleep you're getting, and more," she advises.

Find a substitute.

If drinking is a habit, you've got to find a replacement sip. Water is always the best choice, says Knoblock-Hahn. Trouble is, a tall ice water might not do it for you. Infusing water with sliced citrus fruits (lemon, lime, orange) or cucumber and mint can make it more interesting and feel "special." Pour a can of naturally flavored sparkling water like LaCroix or Spindrift into a wine glass. Or try kombucha, which also has that "bite" that alcohol does. Ready-to-drink mocktails from companies like Be Mixed can also get you through the month without making you feel like you're giving up a ton.

Rethink happy hour.

This all depends on you. For some, being around alcohol is going to present too many temptations, for others, they'll be fine. "If it's particularly challenging, you may be better off taking a break from activities like happy hour or boozy dinners with friends for the month," says Levy.

Cultivate a new way to cope.

If the glass of vino is one way you use to de-stress after the day, you need an alternate way to simmer down. When times get frazzled and you're looking to have a drink or stress eat, Knoblock-Hahn recommends the "distract and delay" tactic. Leave the kitchen and go to another room to read a book or magazine. Do a few light stretches or breathing exercises. "Often when you delay you find, *you know what, I don't need to have it,*" she says.

Think of keeping the Dry January momentum going:

Above all, set rules for yourself. "Determining guidelines will prevent you from falling back into your old routine," says Levy. Make them specific. Rather than "I'm going to drink less now," say that you're going to drink only on Friday and Saturday nights but not at all during the week. And think about a limit, too, like having one glass of wine. (You're an adult; you get to determine the rules that work for you.)

And if you slip up more than once, don't be too hard on yourself. First, it may mean nothing at all! Maybe you decided to stop early and made a conscious decision to do so. But, if the urge to drink feels out of control and you know it's a source of struggle for you, it's something to step back and think about. Same if you feel guilty about your drinking or if it causes problems for you at work or in your relationships — if you're continuing to drink despite those things, alcohol may have become a problem, says Levy. And that's something Dry January just can't fix.