

Damage Control: 7 Bad Habits to Break



1. The Habit: Popping Sleeping Pills

"Many people take over-the-counter sleep aids that are a combination of painkillers and antihistamines, such as Tylenol PM or Advil PM," says David J. Clayton, MD; author of *The Healthy Guide to Unhealthy Living*. "If you're a healthy person who wants occasional help falling asleep, there's no need for the painkillers." Acetaminophens like Tylenol can damage your liver if taken long-term, and it's even more damaging if you've had alcohol, since the liver has to work overtime to break down all those toxins.

Damage control: If you're going to take something to help you sleep, try Benadryl instead of an OTC painkiller and sleep aid combination. The antihistamine ingredients minus the painkillers will help you snooze with less risk of liver damage or stomach irritation. Just be sure to take a dose one to three hours *before* you plan on hitting the sack, because it takes longer to take effect than say, Tylenol PM.

2. The Habit: Being a Weekend Warrior

Research shows that having five to seven alcoholic drinks a week lowers your risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease. But what if you abstain all week and drink six glasses of wine on a Friday night? "The safest amount of alcohol to imbibe is about one drink a day for women," says Dr. Clayton. "Binge drinking raises blood pressure, which offsets any of the cardiovascular benefits of moderate drinking."

Moreover, heavy drinking zaps your thiamine (B1) reserves, which is needed for a healthy nervous system, and raises your risk of breast cancer.

Damage control: Enjoy a glass of wine with dinner (pinot noir is high in resveratrol, an antioxidant linked with heart health and anti-aging), but don't have the entire bottle. If you're at happy hour or a party, try adding seltzer water to your wine, or alternate cocktails with seltzer and lime. You'll automatically drink less and save hundreds of calories.

3. The Habit: Bumming a Cigarette

If you don't buy packs, but you bum one or two cigarettes from friends on the weekend, you're still doing body damage. "Just one puff of a cigarette causes the same immediate harmful effects to the lungs as long-term smoking, such as constriction of your airways and paralysis of the tiny hairs that help filter toxins," says Dr. Clayton.

Damage control: Once you quit smoking, it takes about seven to 10 years for your risk of lung cancer and other diseases to match those of non-smokers. Identify your triggers, such as a certain friend who smokes or being around alcohol, and arm yourself with gum, lollipops, or whatever you can chew to keep your mouth occupied. Your lungs will thank you in the a.m.

4. The Habit: Missing Your Birth Control Pills

Missing one or two birth control pills is not a reason to panic. "Theoretically, the pill should be effective if you miss up to two days," says Dr. Clayton. The pill works by keeping estrogen levels steady so you don't ovulate. "Missing one or two pills doesn't give your body enough time to reduce the levels of estrogen enough to release an egg."

Damage control: If you skip two pills, take three on the third day. But two days is the limit as long as you've been taking your pills regularly for the rest of the month, says Dr. Clayton. If you miss any more, you should use backup birth control, such as condoms.

5. The Habit: Having Artificial Sugars

Adding artificial sweeteners to your coffee or snacking on sugar-free foods tend to make you eat more calories in the long run. Why? Because your body expects calories when it tastes something sweet and sends hunger signals to your brain. That makes you want to keep noshing until your body gets those expected calories, says Dr. Clayton.

Damage control: Empty calories in fake sugars boost your appetite, so keep healthy snacks on hand, such as apples and heart-healthy almond butter. It'll help prevent you from raiding the vending machine for high-calorie candy and chips.

6. The Habit: Visiting the Tanning Bed

If you have a special event, a few sessions in a tanning bed once a year might seem like no big deal. "Eighty-percent of aging comes from UV rays, and laying under bulbs emitting those rays ups your risk of wrinkles as well as skin cancer even in short periods of time," says Yael Halaas M.D.; a board-certified facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon in New York City. In fact, people who answered yes to ever visiting a tanning bed on a questionnaire had twice as great a risk of melanoma compared to those who had *never* fake baked.

Damage control: If you want a healthy glow before a big event, skip the tanning beds and try a bronzer or body shimmer, suggests Dr. Halaas. We like The Body Shop Autumn Trend Compact in Berry (\$21; bodyshop.com). And for your body, try Perfect Prep Body Slimmer, a shimmery pressed-powder that's packed with moisturizers, beeswax and lanoline. It has a flat applicator that makes it easy to dust on the contours of your body. (\$35; www.mallybeauty.com).

7. The Habit: A Diet Coke Addiction

If you can't get through the day without drinking Diet Coke, you may be hooked on caffeine. "There is about as much caffeine in one can of Diet Coke as there is in a shot of espresso," says Dr. Clayton. Having a few cans of Diet Coke a day could leave you feeling high, and then low when you come down from the caffeine buzz." Besides triggering major dips in energy, turning to Diet Coke as a pick-me-up makes it tougher to fall asleep in the normal 30-minute range come bedtime. Plus, the acidity in soda can damage tooth enamel if sipped daily.

Damage control: Limit your Diet Cokes to one per day, and don't drink any after 2 p.m. to keep the caffeine from interfering with your sleep patterns. Try rinsing your mouth with water after drinking soda to reduce the effects of its enamel-eroding acidity.