

Beer O'Clock

A Little of What You Fancy Does You Good (Beer O'Clock excerpt)

By Jane Peyton

Beer, if drank with moderation, softens the temper, cheers the spirit and promotes health.

American Founding Father, Thomas Jefferson

Of all alcoholic drinks, beer has more health, nutritional and social benefits than any other.

Consumed moderately, beer has proven health benefits. Moderate consumption of low to medium-alcohol beer (4% ABV) is ten pints a week for men, eight pints a week for women, to be consumed throughout the week (with days off for the liver to have a rest but not, alas, to be saved up for a weekend binge). Dozens of independent medical experiments have concluded that the beer drinkers in their studies were happier and healthier than those who did not drink beer or drank too much. These positive facts about beer are not widely reported because problems caused by alcohol abuse take precedence in the media and there is a reluctance to be seen to be celebrating the drinking of alcohol.

In some British hospitals until at least the mid 1970s, trolleys containing bottles of beer were trundled around the wards, and patients, regardless of whether they were in for an ingrown toenail or cancer, were offered a drink. It was good for morale, but more than anything it was a motivation to get better, leave hospital and go to the pub – after all, it was only a small bottle of beer.

The Ancient Egyptians did not just drink beer for pleasure but also used it as medicine too, for ailments including gum disease, as dressing for wounds, and externally as a poultice to treat piles.

Today, one of the world's leading authorities on beer, Professor Charles

Bamforth, is the author of the definitive work on the positive effects of drinking it. The science behind the health claims for beer is to be found in his book *Beer: Health and Nutrition*.

But before telling you the good news about beer to print on a T-shirt, or on a placard to carry round at all times so that naysayers can be enlightened, let us first dispel one particular and persistent myth about beer.

The Belly

In every language a big stomach is known as a 'beer belly' or 'beer gut'. Some people who do not drink beer have a belly, yet it is still known as a beer belly. How can that be? It should be called a 'burger belly' because weight gain is caused by a person taking in more calories than they expend – it is lifestyle and not exercising enough that puts on the weight. Measure for measure beer has fewer calories than any other alcoholic drink.

Here is a comparison of beer with other popular pub drinks and snacks:

Pint (568 ml) of 4% ABV beer = 190 calories
Medium-sized glass of white wine (175 ml) = 131 calories
Single gin and tonic (with a small bottle of tonic totals 150 ml) = 120 calories
Bottle of alcopop (275 ml) = range is 150–230 calories
Pint (568 ml) of orange juice = 256 calories
Pint (568 ml) of soft drink such as cola = 272 calories
Small packet of crisps = 183 calories
100 g packet of peanuts = 601 calories
And don't forget the doner kebab on the way home from the pub = 800–1000 calories (depending on size)

Beer contains no fat or cholesterol, and is low in carbohydrates and sugars. But some people feel bloated after drinking beer because carbon dioxide in beer warms in the stomach and swells. That is temporary and will soon go away. The answer is to drink lower-carbonated

beer or ideally real ale.

So let us push the belly to one side and consider the health benefits of beer:

Antioxidants

Antioxidants are substances that help to protect the body against the effects of free radicals – molecules that can damage cells, and may trigger heart, cancer and other diseases. Both barley and hops contain antioxidants and consequently beer is rich in them.

The protection of ethanol (alcohol)

In small doses it can protect the body against a number of health problems, including the risk of coronary heart disease, by raising the amount of 'good' cholesterol (high-density lipoprotein), thereby lowering the risk of arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), type 2 diabetes, gallstones and Parkinson's disease.

The many benefits of hops

Hops are a rich source of the micronutrient phytoestrogen. Consumption of phytoestrogen is connected with a decreased incidence of breast cancer in humans. Supplements containing phytoestrogen are used as a natural hormone replacement therapy for post-menopausal women.

Hops can help to prevent calcium leaching from the bones, which is a reason why they found in medical studies that beer drinkers were less likely to suffer from calcium oxalate kidney stones and osteoporosis. Silicon in beer also helps to prevent the latter problem so beer drinkers have a double whammy in fighting



that bone condition.

Medical research suggests that a group of antioxidants known as flavonoids present in hops may prevent the development of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes and certain cancers.

Hops are also antibacterial and can prevent the growth of food-poisoning pathogens, such as *Clostridium difficile*, and *heliobacteria*, which are believed to cause stomach cancer,

duodenal and gastric ulcers.

The properties of hops are also useful for purifying the blood, to stimulate a sluggish liver, and to treat a variety of ailments including insomnia, migraine, indigestion, intestinal cramps, earache, travel sickness, irritability and tension.

Nutritional benefits

Beer contains carbohydrates, proteins, minerals, vitamins, soluble fibre and amino acids. Also, as fermentation increases the nutritional value of

food and drink, the malted cereal in beer is much more nutritious than it would be as breakfast cereal. B vitamins are particularly abundant in beer, as are potassium and silicon, and all three have specific benefits.

B vitamins: The B-vitamin complex is essential for the proper functioning of almost every process in the body, including the central nervous system, energy production, digestion, and the growth of healthy hair, skin and nails.

Potassium: Healthy bodies need potassium. A deficiency can lead to strokes, low blood sugar, muscle disorders, impaired brain function, abnormal blood pressure, heart disease, kidney disorders and stress.

Silicon: Silicon is not produced naturally by the body, but the body needs it nonetheless. Beer is one of the richest sources of silicon available to us (it exists in the husks of barley), which is good news as this essential mineral prevents our bodies from falling apart because of its involvement in the production of collagen – the protein in tendons, blood vessel walls, skin, nails and hair. It also maintains healthy joints and bone density, and that is the reason why the beer drinkers in medical studies were found less likely to suffer from osteoporosis than the non-drinkers. A daily intake of silicon of 25–30 mg is considered ideal and one pint of beer contains around 16 mg of it. Silicon can also help to block the brain's absorption of aluminium, a toxic metal believed to play a role in the onset of Alzheimer's disease and dementia. Therefore, another marvelous benefit of this mineral is its anti-aging properties. Drink beer and stay young!

Watery goodness

Beer is a way of consuming water, though much more fun than a few glasses of H₂O! But beware: the paradox is that some beer drinkers become dehydrated, because beer increases the urge to urinate. All that water, plus the fact that hops are diuretic means that water going in via beer goes out again very quickly. Think of beer as a detox, all those toxins from modern life being flushed out with the aid of your favourite drink. And to avoid dehydration drink some neat H₂O after a session.

To quote a phrase attributed to sixteenth-century Swiss physician Paracelsus: 'Cerevisia malorum divina medicina.' ('A little bit of beer is divine medicine.')

Social welfare

Beer is the most convivial of drinks and makes people happy, which is beneficial for general well-being, and physical and mental health. Professor Sheldon Cohen, Professor of Psychology at Carnegie Mellon University in the USA, said, 'We need to take more seriously the possibility that a positive emotional style is a major player in disease risk.'

Beer helps to build social bonds – just look around the pub to see that in action as people, formerly strangers, start chatting over a pint. Britain's first pubs were alehouses and even today a pub is not really a pub unless it sells beer. Pubs are at the core of British society where people, regardless of background, come together to enjoy the national drink and have a communal good time; after-work drinks down the pub are another example of friendships being cemented over beer. There is a reason why British soap operas set so many scenes in the Rovers, Queen Vic and Woolpack – all life happens in the boozer: relationships are formed, love affairs and celebrations conducted, arguments (and make-ups) developed, business conducted, deals sealed. The pub offers a refuge, companionship, entertainment – and beer is at the centre of it all.

The health benefits of a good social life are not to be underestimated. In a report published in March 2013 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, lead research professor Andrew Steptoe, Director of the Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care at University College London, stated:

Social contact is a fundamental aspect of human existence. The scientific evidence is that being

socially isolated is probably bad for your health, and may lead to the development of serious illness and a reduced life span.

So stay happy and healthy with the help of a glass of your favourite beer down the boozer with your mates!

Beer as medicine

Historically, a variety of plants, herbs and spices were added to beer for their tonic and medicinal properties. They included:

Alder bark and buds: they help to stop diarrhoea.

aloes: used for their purging nature.

Bishop's wort: a cure for fever.

Bogbean: thought to prevent scurvy. In large doses it was used to purge the digestive system.

chamomile: has gentle laxative properties.

coltsfoot: is a good remedy for coughs.

common ash: purges the stomach as a laxative and diuretic, and promotes perspiration.

cowslip: cures dizziness, and relieves stress.

elecampane: herbalist Nicholas Culpeper said it 'cleareth, strengtheneth, and quickeneth the sight of the eyes'.

eyebright: thought to improve sight.

Hyssop: used as an expectorant (helps bring mucus from the lungs) and to calm flatulence.

nettles: used to treat rheumatic and gout pains.

watercress and wild carrot: thought to prevent scurvy.

wood betony: used to treat headaches. Chewing the leaves before drinking was thought to prevent drunkenness.

Specific medical ales were also brewed in England to treat various ailments:

'Buttered beere' was a medieval concoction that contained butter, sugar, two egg yolks and grated ginger; it was believed to be good for shortness of breath and coughs.

Some alehouses prepared tonic ale by soaking a cheesecloth bag containing sarsaparilla, senna pods and other herbs in the cask. The ale was drunk to promote healthy lungs and stomach, and to prevent indigestion and colds.

Saxons believed that the devil was the cause of many health problems. A way to fight 'fiend-sickness' was to add mixed herbs, garlic and holy water to ale and drink it out of an inverted church bell after several masses had been said for the patient.

