- Drinking of alcoholic beverages / Flight

It's best to avoid alcohol on planes, says study

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LONG-HAUL flights entail meals and snacks that passengers often look forward to. These are usually accompanied by a drink — alcoholic or otherwise.



And that's a choice that could have an impact on your health, according to a new study led by researchers at the Institute of Aerospace Medicine at the German Aerospace Center in Cologne (Germany). The study is based on a simple observation: sleeping on a plane heightens the fall in blood oxygen saturation (SpO2) due to the drop in oxygen partial pressure in the cabin.

The scientists, therefore, set out to assess the combined impact of alcohol consumption and hypobaric hypoxia (the drop in atmospheric air pressure) on sleep, blood oxygen saturation and heart rate. And the verdict seems clear-cut, since the researchers recommend avoiding alcohol on long flights.

To carry out their research, published in the journal 'Thorax', the scientists recruited 48 participants aged between 18 and 40, and divided them into two groups.

The first group slept in a sleep laboratory with an atmospheric pressure equivalent to sea level, and the second group slept in a special room with an atmospheric pressure similar to that on a plane at cruising altitude.

Each group was then split in two: some participants drank alcohol, while others abstained, before sleeping for four hours.

The experiments were conducted over two nights, interspersed with recovery periods.

"The combination of alcohol and inflight hypobaric hypoxia reduced sleep quality, challenged the cardiovascular system and led to extended duration of (lower than normal levels of oxygen in the blood)," the study authors write in their paper.

In detail, alcohol consumption combined with hypobaric hypoxia had an impact on deep sleep and heart rate, as well as on oxygen saturation levels, which fell, potentially leading to numerous health effects.

"Even in young and healthy individuals, the combination of alcohol intake with sleeping under hypobaric conditions poses a considerable strain on the cardiac system and might lead to exacerbation of symptoms in patients with cardiac or pulmonary diseases," the researchers say.

They conclude: "Higher doses of alcohol could amplify these observed effects, potentially escalating the risk of health complications and medical emergencies during flight, especially among older individuals and those with pre-existing medical conditions.

"Our findings strongly suggest that the inflight consumption of alcoholic beverages should be restricted."