

## PERSONAL BUSINESS

## Open Bar

## Hangover Helpers

Two products claim to stave off morning-after ills.

By Elin McCoy



◀ Dealing with a head-pounding hangover isn't just a problem for those who party hard on New Year's Eve, trendsetters who habitually mix late-night clubs and the latest cocktails or businesspeople suffering from a night on the town with thirsty clients. Judging from the questions I'm asked, it's also a common complaint of wine connoisseurs, who typically blame the last glass of port at dinner, instead of all the champagne and chardonnay and the barrage of Bordeaux that preceded it.

Remedies abound, but until recently, there's been no hope of a magic bullet. Now, there's a possible

breakthrough in the form of pills that claim to knock out the most-miserable symptoms—dry mouth, nausea, trembling and that attention-grabbing, skull-in-a-vise, death-warmed-over feeling—before they start.

Jokes about hangovers are legion, but they're no laughing matter. Dr. Jeffrey Wiese, associate professor of medicine at Tulane University Health Sciences Center in New Orleans, co-authored a 2000 study that estimated \$148 billion in annual lost productivity in the U.S. could be traced to the occasional overindulgence of the light to moderate drinkers who account for the majority of alcohol

consumers. In the U.K., a recent survey by London-based executive recruitment firm Reed Executive Plc indicated that some 10 million days a year are lost to workers sidelined by hangovers.

The written record on hangovers dates back to the ancient Greeks and Romans, who described the classic morning-after tradition of self-pitying regret for the evening's bacchanalian excesses as well as the search for miracle cures. Up to now, the standard hangover remedies have changed little. Two thousand years ago, Roman scholar Pliny the Elder recommended swallowing raw owl eggs, a restorative not much different than the prairie oyster (raw egg yolk, ketchup, Tabasco, Worcestershire sauce and vinegar) that's still proffered by sympathetic bartenders. Others revolve around gagging down even-less-appetizing concoctions, taking steam or mud baths (very popular in the Napa Valley), guzzling mineral water and B vitamins or just moaning in bed with the shades drawn until enough hours pass for detoxification.

Then there's the hair-of-the-dog school of thought (as in, "the hair of the dog that bit you"), which is based on the not-too-bright idea of postponing the hangover simply by staying inebriated. Hence the scores of cocktails that fall under the category of pick-me-ups, hangover drinks, corpse revivers and the like, of which the vodka-driven bloody mary is perhaps the most famous. (W. C. Fields's prescription was a 4-to-1 gin-to-vermouth martini with an olive, to be taken around the clock.)

Now, science seems poised to provide a better answer: Prevent the hangover. There are several new brands of pills that claim to do just that, at prices that average \$1 a pop. They're sold as

food supplements (hence, falling outside of U.S. Food and Drug Administration jurisdiction) over the counter or on the Internet. Chaser, developed in the U.S. by Walled Lake, Michigan-based Living Essentials, was first test-marketed in 2001, and it's now available nationwide at drug and vitamin stores and on its own Web site. The pills are a combination of calcium carbonate and activated charcoal (the newest version contains homeopathic ingredients as well), which are intended to soak up congeners—headache-producing flavor elements found in brown spirits like scotch and bourbon and in red wines.

"Congeners play a role," Wiese says, adding that they're not the only contributing factor in hangovers. The "three pillars of a hangover," as he puts it, are dehydration, interference with sleep patterns and inflammation—the body's flulike aches and pains in response to excess alcohol. No pill can treat the first two effects, he says; you have to drink fluids and get some undisturbed rest. And the precise mechanisms behind the rest of the unpleasantness aren't entirely clear, he says.

RU-21 is a Russian hangover product that relies on a combination of succinic and fumaric acids, L-glutamine, glucose and vitamin C to "support alcohol metabolism by slowing down the process of ethanol oxidation," according to Los Angeles-based Spirit Sciences

USA Inc., which markets it in the U.S. and other countries. Its supposed invention by the KGB has given RU-21 lots of publicity, including stories about fashion models popping it before hitting after-hours clubs. Spirit Sciences says it does \$1 million in monthly sales worldwide. Not surprisingly, similar products have moved into the field, with names such as Rebound, Sob'r-K HangoverStopper and Alcodol.

Living Essentials and Spirit Sciences cite their own studies as evidence that their products work. Wiese concedes that their claims may be "physiologically plausible" but isn't convinced yet. "I've seen no external research," the kind of independent, full-scale studies that would rule out placebo effects, he says. He was part of an independent study in 2004 that showed an extract of the prickly pear cactus suppressed three of nine hangover symptoms (dry mouth, food aversion and nausea) in the subjects who took it. "There's some solid ground to say that it could work," he says of the extract.

The jury may still be out on the efficacy of the pills, but a growing number of drinkers have already decided they're worth a try. One caveat: For their supposed hangover-suppressing effects to work, you have to take one or more up to several hours beforehand, plus one with each drink. Alas, forethought is not something that's helped by the let-your-hair-down attitude many people adopt for an alcohol-laced evening.

And even if you remember to take some pills along on your next pub crawl—and then remember to take them—bear in mind that you'll still get drunk.

I wimped out on giving any of these pills a personal test when I realized I'd have to spend an evening getting hammered on purpose (not my favorite activity) just to see if I'd wake up the next morning regret free. But I'm packing a few in my purse, just in case. I might need them the next time I'm doing some serious field research. ▶

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### Resources

**CHASER**

Living Essentials  
888-960-9495  
www.doublechaser.com

**RU-21**

Spirit Sciences USA  
866-556-5577  
www.ru-21.com

For more than you ever wanted to know about hangovers and outlandish remedies, consult these two books of the same name by different authors.

**THE HANGOVER HANDBOOK** by David Outerbridge (Random House, 1981)

**THE HANGOVER HANDBOOK** by Nic Van Oudtshoorn (Mustang Publishing, 1997)

For more on shopping for wine and spirits, type SHWS <Go>.

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