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AVOIDING THE WRATH OF GRAPES

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Products claim to prevent morning-after ailments

When it comes to treating hangovers, some people swear by aspirin and water before bed, while others believe in greasy food and caffeine. McAllen residents and roommates Derek Galyen and Cap Vick said they both have their own remedies.

"The only thing I've ever done for prevention is eat dinner before I go out, or I drink some fluids," said Galyen, 23. "Other than that I take my chances."

"If I can remember to do it, I drink two bottles of water and take Advil before going to bed," said Vick, 24. "For the most part, that's it."

In spite of their attempts, both Galyen and Vick said they still sometimes get hangovers, which manifest as body aches, headaches, nausea and fatigue, among other things.

Whether you're a mild, moderate or heavy drinker, morning-after hangovers don't discriminate. According to the Mayo Clinic Web site, nearly 75 percent of people who drink to intoxication experience a hangover the next day. Because so many people experience the symptoms, many look for any way they can to prevent or treat hangovers, including over-the-counter pills which claim to help prevent the condition. From the "all-natural" pill RU-21 to a patch called Sober X, they each use a different method to reduce the effects caused by overdrinking.

One of the most commonly sold products is a pill called Chaser, which is sold locally at Wal-Mart, Walgreen Drug Stores and GNC. According to Carl Sperber, marketing director for Chaser's manufacturer Living Essentials, the active ingredients found in Chaser are calcium carbonate and activated charcoal. Charcoal is a detoxifying compound, Sperber said. Once ingested, it works by latching onto the impurities in alcohol which contribute to hangovers and prevents their absorption into the blood stream. By using charcoal, the impurities, called cogeners, either stay in the body's gut or exit the body, Sperber said.

Sober X, in contrast, is not a pill, but rather a patch applied an hour before consuming alcohol. According to the manufacturer's Web site and an e-mail from the company, Sober X uses ingredients like milk thistle and artichoke to help the body metabolize alcohol.

Another hangover prevention supplement is a pill called RU-21, which is also available locally at GNC. According to Mandy Barton, director of marketing and nonprofit programs for RU-21's parent company, Spirit Sciences, RU-21 works by supplying the body with extra nutrients, vitamins and acids, all of which the body already uses to fight hangovers. The supplement's ingredients are considered "Generally Regarded As Safe" (GRAS) by the Food and Drug Administration, Barton said, and are safe for everyday consumption.



Alex Jones

Hangover pills like Chaser and RU- 21 promise relief from the symptoms of overindulgence.

Products like RU-21, Chaser and Sober X technically fall under the realm of "dietary supplements." Because these products are not made from synthesized molecules like prescription medication, they do not follow the same Food and Drug Administration guidelines, Sperber said. Instead, a company must inform the FDA what ingredients are in the product, what these ingredients allegedly do, and provide proof to back up their claims. The FDA then decides whether or not the product's ingredients are GRAS.

While both Chaser and RU-21 have ingredients considered safe, that doesn't necessarily make them completely effective. Both Sperber and Barton said their respective products work only to a certain extent.

"If you're consuming too much alcohol, nothing will help you," Barton said. "We're talking about something for regular users of alcohol."

While Chaser's cleansing method, known to medical experts as chelation therapy, is a valid technique used in hospitals and emergency rooms, there is a limit to what activated charcoal can do in a pill form, said Omar Espericueta, clinical pharmacist at the Pharr Family Pharmacy located at 710 S. Cage Blvd.

"The theory behind Chaser has some validity to it," he said. "However, if you drink a ton and you only take two capsules, the recommended dose may not be enough to offset the overdrinking."

Hangover supplements may prevent some of the symptoms of a hangover, but they can't take care of them all. According to the Mayo Clinic Web site, alcohol's different qualities cause various hangover symptoms. Because alcohol is a diuretic, drinking it causes the body to lose water via urination. This process can lead to dehydration, which is characterized by dizziness, thirst and lightheadedness. Alcohol also irritates stomach lining and contributes to increased stomach acid, which can cause nausea or vomiting.

Dr. Javier Cortinez, medical director of the emergency department at the Doctors Hospital at Renaissance in Edinburg, also said alcohol can disturb the body's blood sugar balance, a condition known as hypoglycemia. Low blood sugar can cause the body to experience fatigue, weakness, shakiness and moodiness. While a pill like RU-21 might help with the body's hypoglycemia, it will not help symptoms caused by dehydration or stomach acid, he said.

While the supplements' manufacturers and medical experts might disagree on the level of effectiveness these products have, they all agree on one thing: the best way to avoid a hangover is not to over-drink.

"If you over-drink, you're going to have a hangover, period," Espericueta said. "You can't get rid of alcohol fast enough for any remedy to work that much."

Both Gaylen and Vick said they wouldn't be opposed to trying these kinds of products. However, both said they are skeptical of how effective they are. Vick, who tried a hangover supplement several years ago during his spring break in Panama City and still got a hangover, said he would believe it when he sees it.

"I'd try it if it worked," he said. "My buddies from college have tried them before, too, but we've never really found one that worked."

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