

USA WEEKEND

AUGUST 27-29, 2004
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HealthSmart By TEDD MITCHELL, M.D.

RU-21: License to drink?



Imagine James Bond out on the town with a beautiful Russian spy. A few bottles of champagne later, he's passed out while she (unaffected by the alcohol) is now free to rummage around in his hotel room. Her trick? An "antidote" to alcohol she took ahead of time, which allowed her to drink without becoming inebriated.

Sound far-fetched? Well, Soviet scientists tried to develop such a pill during the Cold War. The problem: Although it seemed to help with hangovers, it didn't prevent getting drunk. So, the "KGB pill" never made it to prime time. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, information about this supplement became available, and entrepreneurs took notice. Spirit Sciences USA, a company based in Los Angeles, sells a dietary supple-

ment, marketed as RU-21, online and in stores.

The makers of RU-21, which is produced in Moscow, say it enhances the body's capacity to break down alcohol and prevent the buildup of acetaldehyde, a toxic by-product of alcohol metabolism. Besides warding off hangovers, acetaldehyde may be linked to alcohol-related diseases, including liver damage.

Spirit Sciences sees the product as a tool to lower a drinker's long-term risk, as well as help prevent hangovers.

Many involved in preventing alcoholism are concerned about sending a message that a pill can make drinking risk-free. Also controversial: RU-21, as a dietary supplement, requires neither ap-

proval from the Food and Drug Administration nor a prescription.

This much is certain: RU-21 will make its way to campuses and nightclubs. Until further research is done, we should proceed with caution. By eliminating a consequence of drunkenness, more people may feel a license to drink. But combined with driving, that can become a license to kill. I think that's one license we need to leave to James Bond.

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