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Aches & Claims / By Jennifer Saranow

Chasing Away a Hangover

LOOKING FOR A PILL that will let you party like a rock star without regretting it the next morning? A growing number of products profess to lessen the severity of the common hangover. With names such as Chaser and Hangover Magic, they are popping up on Web sites and increasingly, in drug and nutrition stores. One new product, called Rebound, made of an extract of amber, is expected to be in U.S. retail stores by the end of the year. But so far, there's limited evidence to back up manufacturers' claims.

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Most of the products purport to act on the metabolism of alcohol in the body. The thinking is that by speeding up the metabolism of alcohol or preventing its toxic components from building up in the body, common symptoms of hangovers such as headache, nausea, fatigue, shakiness, loss of appetite, diarrhea and vomiting could be alleviated.

Some products such as Spirit Sciences USA Inc.'s RU-21, which supposedly was tested by the Russian KGB in the 1980s, claim to help the body break down acetaldehyde, a toxic byproduct of alcohol produced in the liver. RU-21 specifically claims to slow down the metabolism of alcohol into acetaldehyde then speed up the breakdown of acetaldehyde into water and carbon dioxide. Other products purport to absorb toxic elements of alcohol called congeners that come from fermentation and additives or speed up the body's protective and restorative response to congeners.

Problem is, researchers say they don't yet conclusively know what causes a hangover. Many believe that hangover symptoms result from the brain's adaptation to alcohol in the brain, followed by withdrawal. Other theories include inflammation of cells and tissues, dehydration or sleep disturbance. Other experts say hangovers are caused by a combination of those things.

The upshot: By acting only on the metabolism of alcohol, existing hangover treatments may not get at the root of what really causes the



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regrettable state, researchers say. "None of the supposed cures addresses all of the theories," says Jeffrey Wiese, associate professor of medicine at Tulane University Health Sciences Center.

While there are studies backing up the actions of individual ingredients contained in the products, most of those studies use doses much higher than what's actually found on store shelves. Plus, clinical studies on actual products so far are limited. What clinical trials there are tend to be company funded, focus on small numbers of subjects, cast results with a positive slant and haven't yet been published in peer-reviewed journals.

An exception is a study of HPP Hangover Prevention Formula published in the Archives of Internal Medicine last month. The study found the prickly pear extract product slightly reduced some—but not all—hangover symptoms.

The supplements vary in price, running from \$2.99 for six tablets of RU-21 to \$24.95 for 10 capsules of HPP Hangover Prevention Formula. Products also have different dosages, varying from taking one before going out for up to three days of protection to one required with every drink.

Not overdoing it is the surest way to avoid hangovers. But if you indulge, be sure to drink on a full stomach and drink lots of water before going to sleep. There's also some evidence that opting for lighter drinks with fewer toxic elements such as highly filtered vodkas versus darker bourbons or scotches may stave off some symptoms.

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