

How can I avoid a holiday hangover?

A Straight Dope Classic from Cecil's Storehouse of Human Knowledge

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Dear Cecil:

The straight dope, s'il vous plait. Is there any reason to believe that any particular sort of booze will cause a worse hangover than any other sort? What about the old saw that mixing different kinds of booze (gin and beer, say) will guarantee a hangover? What, if anything, will prevent or cure one?

— *Dean M., Chicago*

Cecil replies:

Most scientists would rather ponder the origins of the universe than do hangover research, Dean — these people just have no sense of priorities — so we still don't have definite answers to these questions. It's widely believed that Scotch, for instance, will cause a worse hangover than vodka, and that red wine will afflict you more than white. But the clinical studies on this point are inconclusive. The problem is that judging the severity of a hangover is highly subjective, and the differences among individuals are enormous. Some folks, supposedly, can quaff Rotgut Red with ease but get sick from white wine. Even mood can play a role.

Numerous substances in alcohol have been suspected at one time or another of making hangovers worse. Some think, for example, that hangover severity is related to substances called congeners, which are the organic alcohols and salts that give alcoholic beverages their flavor. Congeners are present in greater quantity in "brown goods" such as Scotch and bourbon than in "white goods" like vodka and gin. By the same token, some think histamines, which are found in greater quantities in red wine than white, account for the suffering differential in vino. Others blame sugar, which is relatively abundant in champagne, widely regarded as the most lethal of all alcoholic beverages. No firm evidence, however, has been adduced to support any of these notions. The congeners hypothesis, after some years on the outs, seems to have come back into fashion, but I haven't seen any scientific evidence to support it. For what it's worth, most experts doubt that mixing your liquor makes hangovers worse.

The phenomenon of hangover itself is not clearly understood. Some say you get a hangover because alcohol restricts the flow of blood to the brain. Others say you get one because alcohol causes the body to dehydrate. Alcohol also causes your blood sugar to drop and your blood acidity to rise, which may play some role as well. In short, the situation is totally confused.

The hell with theory, you say. What I want is a cure. Yeah, you and about 50 million other people. Cecil offers no cure-alls, and for sure no guarantees, but here's a few tips, culled from sundry sources, some more reliable than others.

(1) "Hair of the dog" — i.e., a little nip of whatever it was you had the night before--may actually do you some good on the morning after, many researchers agree. What you're really doing is applying anesthesia. Remember, a LITTLE nip.

(2) Drink lots of fluids to rehydrate yourself. Many claim the best way to minimize hangover is a glass of water right before bed, another glass if you wake up in the night, and another glass in the morning. Other beverages might be salubrious, too, provided they're not acidic. In other words, ixnay on the tomato or orange juice. If you want to have a little aspirin with your water, OK. But no aspirin BEFORE drinking — one study found preventative aspirin actually increased the amount of alcohol delivered to the bloodstream. Remember also that alcohol irritates the stomach lining. However, do NOT, under any circumstances, use Tylenol (acetaminophen) instead. Tylenol in combination with alcohol can cause severe and potentially fatal liver damage. While we're on the subject of things not to do, don't head for the sauna on the theory that you'll sweat the alcohol out of your system. You'll just give yourself an even worse case of dehydration.

(3) Try eating a little honey. (The kind in a jar, silly.) Supposedly the fructose helps reduce hangover symptoms. Studies have failed to find much benefit but some people swear by this, so what the hell.

(4) Take your vitamins. This is recommended mostly by guys selling vitamins. The experts are pretty scornful. Then again, it's not like anybody really has a better idea. If you're game, try this recipe I found in an old issue of the noted scientific journal *Esquire*:

- One 100-milligram tablet vitamin B1

- One 100-milligram vitamin B6
- One 250-milligram capsule BHT (butylated hydroxytoluene, a common preservative)
- One capsule Twinlab MaxiLife multiple vitamin.

It's claimed this completely eliminates the effects of light to moderate consumption of alcohol.

Naturally, Cecil will be pleased to receive field reports on any and all of the above. We cannot achieve progress unless we are willing to take the occasional risk.

— Cecil Adams