Singing the Booze

Need to kill that killer hangover? Nurse pours on the charms that will get your juices flowing again.

May 1, 2001 By Greg Lugliani

Mistress of Medicine,

Pray for me. I've dwelt in the hell of some humdinger hangovers -- you know, the kind that leave you begging for instant death. What pearls of wisdom can you cast before this swilling swine?

-- The Boston Guzzler

Dear Guz,

Off the bat, my boozy Bostonian, duty demands that I declaim: Hitting the sauce is bad medicine. You've already got a renegade retrovirus squatting in your vital organs. Why tax them (especially Mr. Liver) with the added stress of alcoholic overindulgence? Tests have shown that booze can boost viral replication -- not to mention producing ugly drug interactions. (Read med labels before you belly up to the bar and your eyes go bleary.)

With that alarm sounded, it may come as a surprise, dear readers, to learn that your Nursie has put in her time on bar stools and nipping from bottles in brown paper bags, and is no stranger to hangovers. Odious they may be, but morning-afters are a complex system designed by Mother Nature to rid the body of poisonous potations. A combination of liver toxicity, dehydration and malnutrition, hangovers come in many sizes, each determined by physiology, type of booze imbibed, amount of food eaten, even state of mind. Mercy me, who can remember all that when it's last call?

Dehydration, the primary cause of cork-lover's curse, occurs when the liver and kidneys do double time to detoxify the offensive ethanol (Veuve Clicquot or Bud, it's the same active ingredient). And hooch inhibits the pituitary gland's secretion of antidiuretic hormone. That's what keeps you visiting Mr. Peepers.

Hangovers' other cause is less familiar: congeners. Fomented by fermentation, these toxins give spirits their flavors, smells and looks -- and give you those soul-robbing headaches. The darker the sauce, the higher the congener content. Brandy, rum and scotch have six times' the congeners of gin; bourbon, 30 times' vodka's. *Vino rosso's* exceed *bianco's.* Beginning to see the light?

"Where are the remedies, Nursie?" you gasp. To begin, some colorful ones of lore: Ancient Romans

noshed on fried canaries to give their hangovers the bird. Wild Westerners rustled up a tea of dried rabbit dung. Mongolians sought relief from pickled sheep's eye served in tomato juice.

For you, Guz, I'll make it easier: *Hydrate.* Electrolyte-rich drinks such as Gatorade are better than water; fruit and veggie juices, especially sodium- and potassium-rich tomato juice (hold the sheep's eye), restore fluid and minerals. Obey the beer hall maxim: Match each round of liquor with a glass of water.

Next, sleep it off. Alcohol is a depressant, so shut-eye may befall you -- it's called passing out -- before you're freshly flushed with sufficient fluid. If you wake up howling "I'll never drink again," swig some more water (or, if you can't hold that down, room-temperature ginger ale) and wobble back to bed.

Head apounding, many hangover sufferers pop pain relievers -- aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil). These can ease your aches, but wrap your pickled noodle around this: Aspirin can further irritate your booze-beaten gut, cause gastrointestinal bleeding, neutralize the liver enzyme needed to metabolize alcohol -- and *raise* liquor levels in the bloodstream. With your body aslosh in sherry, acetaminophen can add stress -- and way worse -- to your liver, too.

Coffee's a hangover-helper, constricting blood vessels dilated by drink. But beware of java's dehydrating effect. Pepto-Bismol or buttermilk can coat your sick stomach and unwrench your gut. Booze raids your body's vitamin and minerals, so replenish -- especially the Bs, C, zinc and magnesium. (*POZ*'s science editor, Lark Lands, swears by a blend of N-acetyl-cysteine, alpha-lipoic acid, vitamin C and B complex, slurped down with yogurt.)

Good Lord, look at the time! It's happy hour somewhere in the world, Guz, and Nursie has to dash. Cheerio!

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