

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Is There a Hangover Cure ?”

“Hair of the dog” won’t help a hangover, but certain plant extracts will, researchers have found. Researchers in Germany (*Prost!*) have reported in *BMJ Nutrition Prevention & Health* that a plant-based concoction of fruits, leaves, and roots may help to relieve symptoms of veisalgia (the medical term for a hangover). They were given a supplement dissolved in sugar water. The mixture included specific plant extracts, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidant compounds commonly believed to ease the physical and psychological symptoms associated with drinking alcohol. The plant extracts included Barbados cherry (also known as acerola), prickly pear, *Ginkgo biloba*, white willow, and ginger root. The vitamins and minerals included magnesium, potassium, sodium bicarbonate, zinc, riboflavin, thiamin, and folic acid. The antioxidant compounds were steviol glycosides and inulin. The researchers gathered 214 healthy adults in a well-lit room and let them drink as much beer, wine, wine spritzer, or “radler” (a mix of beer and fizzy lemonade, popular in Germany) as they wanted over the course of 4 hours. Also, before the 4-hour “alcohol intake phase,” the researchers distributed 3 different premixed solutions to 3 groups of randomized participants. The first group received a mixture containing the plant extracts, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidant compounds. The second group was given a similar mixture of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants but without plant extracts. The third group got only sugar water (placebo). Participants reported wide variations in the intensity of their symptoms. But only those given the full supplement of plant extracts, minerals, vitamins, and antioxidants reported less severe symptoms. On average, they had 34% lower headache intensity, 42% less nausea, 27% less indifference, and 41% reduced restlessness compared with the placebo group. They had no changes or reductions in any other hangover symptom, though. The plant extracts were largely responsible for the reduced hangover symptoms, the researchers concluded. Other researchers have found that the polyphenol and flavonoid compounds in each of the five plant extracts have been associated with reducing the physiological impact of alcohol. But it’s not clear how. The underlying mechanisms remain to be unraveled and surely need further investigation. The researchers found a couple of other surprising results. First, they saw no association between alcohol consumption and body water content, which indicates that drinking alcohol doesn’t necessarily lead to dehydration. Thus, the hypothesis that alcohol-induced dehydration is a cause for the expression of hangover symptoms such as headache cannot be supported. The group that received the mixture containing vitamins, minerals, and electrolytes, but no plant extracts, had no improvement in their hangover symptoms. It seems to be clear that hangover symptoms are predominantly caused by alcohol and its metabolites.

In the America that I love, remember to always "think before you drink."

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