Eat, drink and be merry, without the holiday hangover

By ACSH Staff — December 23, 2013

This holiday season, it’s OK to be merry and bright, but remember that a night of drunken reveling can most certainly result in a holiday hangover the next day. And those bells you hear jingeling will only be in your head and they’ll be loud.

According to a previously published review in the Annals of Internal Medicine, five to seven drinks for men and three to five drinks for women will almost always result in a hangover. And at this time of year, the holiday cocktails no matter how delightful, will be to blame. The most common symptoms of a hangover include headache, nausea, fatigue, and overall decreased cognitive and physical performance. After analyzing reports from 1966 to 1999, the review identified acetaldehyde, the breakdown product of alcohol that causes dehydration, as one of the possible causes of hangovers.

Worse yet the report finds, is that hangovers are related to work absence and poor job performance (duh) resulting in $168 billion annually in lost wages in the U.S.

Despite a myriad of home remedies to get rid of the pounding headache, few trials have studied the treatments of hangovers. Other than avoiding alcohol entirely, some studies suggest sticking to clear liquors when mixing cocktails may be beneficial in avoiding the sickness. Congeners, ingredients found in dark liquors, were shown to increase the severity of a hangover. The old wives tales of consuming carbohydrates to ease the pain did not have any merit when tested.

One study reported that volunteers who had tolfenamic acid, a prostaglandin inhibitor, on the night of drinking reported less headache, nausea or vomiting the next day. In another study, taking vitamin B6 before, during and after drinking reduced hangover symptoms by 50 percent. Food consumption, quality of sleep, and overall physical activity before indulging in the festivities also play a role the day after.

ACSH’s Dr. Josh Bloom finds this to be a no-brainer. He says, alcohol is metabolized in two separate steps. The first step forms acetaldehyde, which is quite toxic. In the second step the acetaldehyde is converted into acetic acid (vinegar) which is harmless. But if you drink too much this second step cannot keep up with increasing amounts of alcohol, and acetaldehyde will accumulate. This will make you feel decidedly unwell.
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