



MORNING AFTER: Bette Davis nursing a hangover in the 1937 film *It's Love I'm After*

CORBIS

Hangovers are good for you

(and if you don't get them, it's time to get worried)

By **Caroline Bellamy**

Too much alcohol the night before can leave you with the hangover from hell and feeling as if your body is about to collapse. About 92 per cent of British adults drink alcohol – making a hangover one of the UK's most common ailments.

So it may come as a surprise to know this is your body working at its best. Your entire system has gone into action to rid itself of toxins and it is only when you drink heavily but do not get a hangover that you need to be concerned.

'The symptoms of a hangover are essentially the product of dehydration,' says Dr Roger Henderson, a GP for netdoctors.co.uk. 'It means your kidneys are working properly.'

In a healthy body, alcohol causes a decrease in the anti-diuretic hormone (ADH) that is produced in the pituitary gland at the base of the brain. As blood alcohol rises, less ADH is produced and you lose more water through urine, leading to dehydration.

'Alcohol is absorbed through the stomach and enters the bloodstream, where it causes the pH of all bodily fluids to become more acidic than they should be, a process called metabolic acidosis,' Dr Henderson says. 'PH varies throughout the body. Neutral pH is 7, blood is a slightly alkaline pH 7.4, stomach fluids are very acidic with a pH of 1 to 4, the skin is pH 5.5.'

'If blood pH goes below 6.9 or above 7.9 it is usually fatal if it lasts for more than a short time. Acidosis causes only a fraction of a drop, but is enough to disturb normal cellular reactions causing aches, pains, nausea and sweating.'

'Research shows that the level of metabolic acidosis is directly proportional to the severity of the hangover. The more you drink, the worse the acidosis and the worse the hangover. It takes the body between 18 and 24 hours to recover completely,' he says.

Within two to four hours of the first drink, kidney output decreases dramatically, causing a state of temporary alcohol-induced dehydration.

'In someone who drinks very heavily, the kidneys might not be functioning as well, so they won't lose as much water and won't be as dehydrated. Despite being less effective at flushing out toxins, they feel the effects of drinking less than someone who is not a regular drinker,' Dr Henderson says.

A hangover also shows your liver is functioning properly. As the liver breaks down alcohol, byproducts – acetaldehyde and congeners – are released into the body.

Acetaldehyde can cause migraine-strength headaches and vomiting. Congeners – found in high concentrations in darker alcoholic drinks such as red wine, whisky and port – cause tremors and even depression. 'Your liver tries to protect the body,' says Dr Rajiv Jalan, consultant hepatologist

Sore head? Try a milk thistle

With its distinctive white-veined leaves, herbalists have long believed the milk thistle plant – which comes from the same group of flowers as the daisy – might help detoxify and protect the liver, gall bladder and spleen from excess alcohol consumption.



ALAMY

The seeds contain an antioxidant called silymarin. This substance, which consists of a group of compounds called flavonolignans, helps repair liver cells damaged by alcohol and other substances.

Silymarin also keeps new liver cells from being destroyed and reduces inflammation.

The herb, taken in tablet, tincture or liquid extract form before or after drinking, is also thought to contain phytochemicals that help fight toxic overload.

for The London Clinic. 'It releases an enzyme, alcohol dehydrogenase, to break down alcohol into a harmless chemical so less enters the bloodstream. The high levels of alcohol dehydrogenase in our liver and stomach detoxify about two units of alcohol per hour.'

Regular drinkers have more of this enzyme and will not feel the effects of alcohol despite the damage it is doing. Recent studies have shown alcohol dehydrogenase is more readily released by young livers, which is why hangovers get worse as we age.

'But the enzymes the liver produces to protect the body convert alcohol into acetaldehyde, which damages the liver. This is why heavy drinking can lead to liver failure,' warns Dr Jalan.

If your muscles are shaking the next morning, it means your kidneys are doing their job and you are dehydrated.

'Muscles work with electrical impulses from the nerve,' says physiotherapist Chris Norris from Manchester. 'That impulse works with sodium to make the muscle contract. If you don't have enough sodium – the kidneys flush out sodium with potassium in urine when you've drunk too much – muscles will not contract properly.'

'Alcohol also affects your blood sugar, which gives muscles energy. If you don't have enough energy, your muscles will shake. The more often you drink alcohol, the less likely you will have these shakes. This is not a good sign – it means your body is desensitising towards alcohol.'

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