

Cheers for hangover help

With more options on the market, drinkers can avoid getting hangovers



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You are heading out for a night of fun, with the promise of lots of wine, beer, cocktails or spirits. But you need to be alert for work the next day and not green in the face with a hangover.

What do you do?
You take a hangover cure.
There is an increasing number of options in convenience and grocery stores, and online. Many of the brands come from Japan or South Korea, and are available in liquid, jelly or pill form. The ones from Japan contain either turmeric or animal liver extract, or a combination of the two. Many Korean brands contain extracts from the fruit of the oriental or Japanese raisin tree, which is native to Korea, Japan and South-east Asia.

This extract, Dihydropyridinone or DHM, is what fights hangovers. In a study published in 2020 in the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical And Experimental Research*, researchers from the University of Southern California's School of Pharmacy found that the extract not only mitigates the effects of a hangover, but also "triggers profound changes that protect the liver".

Professor Jing Liang, one of the authors of the study, says: "We know DHM helps the body to metabolise alcohol faster, but how does it work? We found that it activates a cascade of mechanisms that erases alcohol from the body very quickly."

Two Singapore companies – DrinkAid and Bounceback – emerged during the pandemic, and are making strides in selling their hangover cures here and overseas. Both contain DHM and are sold as supplements, which are not subject to approvals and licensing by the Health Sciences Authority.

DrinkAid launched in August 2020 and broke even within a week. Its founders, Mr Ryan Foo and Mr Solomon Poon, say sales have doubled every year and they are now chalking up six-figure sales every month. The supplement is available in Malaysia, and the company is applying to have it distributed in Taiwan and Thailand. It also ships worldwide, and has had orders from customers in 20 countries.

Bounceback launched a year later, in August last year, in Singapore and Malaysia. In January, its hangover cure was launched in Canada and the United States, and in the United Kingdom and the European Union in March. In these four markets, the product is called Hangly.

Co-founder Roy Ang says he has seen a 30 per cent growth in revenue month on month, and the business chalked up 700 per cent growth between January and July this year.

Both companies have tie-ups with bars here to carry their product, and are in talks to have their supplements sold in petrol stations.

Their customers are white-collar professionals aged 25 and older, and both brands have slightly more male than female customers.

But these are by no means the only hangover cures that people in the drinks business rely on.

"The traditional and best cure is shijimi miso soup," says Mr Aki Eguchi, 41, bar director of the Jigger & Pony Group, referring to miso soup with black-shelled, freshwater clams.

Like others, he also swears by Hepalyse, a hangover cure from Japan that is available here.

Mr Jack Lau, 40, sake sommelier for restaurant group Iki Concepts, says: "We serve this to our customers for sake pairing meals and for certain sake masterclasses. The feedback has been very good. People who have taken it say it has solved their hangover problems."

Mr Derek Ong, 34, chief executive of Topsy Collective, a restaurant and nightspots group, says he takes liver supplements from American brand Usana and also drinks oxygenated water.

Meanwhile, Mr Kaustubh Singh Negi, 27, brand ambassador for Stranger & Sons Gin, which is made by India's Third Eye Distillery, says: "I usually don't get hangovers, I'm one of those lucky people. But I do feel haggard after a big night. So I usually have a big meal first thing when I wake up, and loads of 100Plus and Pocari Sweat."

For Mr Boo Jing Heng, 31, beverage director of restaurant group Proper Concepts, it is easy-to-digest carbohydrates.

"Mee soto is my favourite," he says. "Also vitamin C, coconut water and lots of water to hydrate."

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PROFESSOR JING LIANG, one of the authors of a study published in 2020 in the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical And Experimental Research*, on the effects of Dihydropyridinone

Bounce back after a hangover

BOUNCEBACK
bounceback.sg

When he was a corporate executive, Mr Roy Ang used to have to network and entertain three to four times a week. And contend with the brutal hangovers the morning after.

The 35-year-old was on the founding team for Grab Financial Group, which runs the tech company's merchant solutions and GrabPay operations in the region. He noticed how his Japanese business associates were fine the morning after a big night.

"They could function the next day, it was magical," he says, adding that they told him about a popular Japanese hangover cure, Ukon No Chikara, which contains turmeric.

"I took it and was intrigued because it really helped me," he says.

He tried other hangover cures, and found that Japanese raisin tree extract or DHM is used in a lot of hangover cures in the United States.

"There are over 60 brands on Amazon," he says. "I started digging into it a lot more."

He quit his job in 2020, and persuaded a colleague, Mr Teoh Ming Hao, 36, to join him in his new venture.

The going was tough at first. They had to find a laboratory here that would be willing to work with them to come up with a formula for the hangover cure.

Mr Ang says: "We cold called everyone, 20 to 30 labs, and no one wanted to talk to us."

They did, eventually, find that

lab. Developing the formula for Bounceback took about six months, and started with testing 50 existing products, narrowing the list down, and then coming out with their own formula. Aside from DHM, their hangover capsules also contain vitamins B and C, ginger, ginseng, black pepper and milk thistle, among other ingredients.

They recruited about 200 friends and family members to help test the product. It is made by three contract manufacturers in Singapore and the US, in facilities that have good manufacturing practice certification, and which produce supplements for other brands.

They launched the capsules in Singapore and Malaysia in August last year, and then within months, they were available all over the world. Last month, Bounceback launched in Hong Kong. They are also looking to Thailand and Vietnam, markets where the "alcohol penetration is high".

Mr Ang says: "We come from Grab, and we know that if you want to build a brand, it has to be global from day one."

The capsules are also sold in about 10 nightspots and restaurants here, on their website and also on Shopee and Lazada. A box of 40 capsules costs \$49.90. Drinkers take two before drinking and two after.

They now have over 10,000 customers around the world, and have raised US\$2.5 million (S\$3.5 million) in funding to date. More than half went to research and development, prototyping and test-



ing, and brand building.

The focus is now on going deeper into the markets where Bounceback is in, and coming up with new products. These include the hangover cure in liquid or jelly form, and an isotonic drink to help people hydrate the morning after.

Mr Ang named the product after the effect he wanted from taking the hangover cure – bouncing back after drinking. But the name also describes the journey he and Mr Teoh have taken so far – quitting their jobs, starting a business during a pandemic, and the obstacles along the way.

Like their product, they have bounced back. Mr Teoh says: "There have been ups and downs. There were times when we asked ourselves, 'Why did we quit (our jobs)?'"



Bounceback co-founders (top, from left) Roy Ang and Teoh Ming Hao got help from about 200 friends and family members to test the product. ST PHOTOS: FELINE LIM



Drinkers' little helper

DRINKAID
drinkaid.co

While on holiday in South Korea in 2018, Mr Ryan Foo, 28, found hangover cures in convenience stores there. He says he is prone to Asian Flush syndrome, where drinkers, usually Asians, turn red after drinking alcohol. This is because their bodies lack an enzyme and cannot metabolise alcohol properly.

He figured there are others like him in Singapore, and thought there might be a market for a supplement that people take before and after drinking to mitigate the redness and hangovers.

At the time, he was a law student at the Singapore Management University, and he roped in schoolmate Solomon Poon, then an economics major. Mr Poon, also 28, says he gets hives and turns red when he drinks.

Mr Poon, a certified nutritionist, got to figuring out a formula for their hangover cure. The prototypes were cooked up in his bedroom. He ordered ingredi-

ents such as DHM, the extract from the Japanese raisin tree that cures hangovers, online and used himself as a guinea pig.

He would take a version of his supplement and drink one pint of beer every two days, to make sure all the alcohol had left his system before he took another dose and drank another pint.

Perfecting that formula took six months, he says. Aside from DHM, the supplement also contains ginger and black pepper extract, and S-Acetyl Glutathione – an antioxidant – among other ingredients. When they had a prototype, they applied for a grant from the university's business incubator programme and were awarded \$10,000 to start DrinkAid. As part of the programme, they also had eight months of mentoring to get their business off the ground.

They got their product tested in a certified lab to make sure it would be safe for consumption, and found a factory in China with good manufacturing practice certification that would make the

supplement for them. They broke even within a week of their August 2020 launch.

Singapore was in the thick of Covid-19 restrictions at the time, but that seemed to work in their favour. Because few other businesses were launching, or launching new products, media outlets seized on their story. Mr Foo says: "I guess that was the silver lining." Things were on the up and up until December that year, when dining restrictions were imposed yet again. "Every time there was a lockdown, sales would drop by half," he says.

But DrinkAid saw sales spike when the Government lifted dining and social distancing restrictions and when nightlife came back. Mr Poon says sales doubled overnight.

DrinkAid is available on their website, and also on Amazon, Qoo10, Shopee, Lazada and Shopify. The capsules are also sold in more than 30 nightspots and restaurants here, including Zouk, Joo Bar and Frenchie, a wine bar and restaurant in Tras Street.

A box of 12 capsules costs \$19.90. Drinkers take two capsules before drinking, and two after.

Mr Poon says they have had orders from the United States, Canada, Australia, Finland, Denmark, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

"The customers have Asian names," he adds. "So it makes sense for us to target Asian communities in these countries when we do our marketing."

They are working on two new versions of their product – a gummy bear version of DrinkAid and an extended release version of the capsule. Currently, the product releases into the blood stream within 15 minutes of someone taking it, and peaks in 45 minutes to one hour. They want to have a five-hour or longer release time.

Ultimately, they realise they will need to sell their product retail to grow, just like when Mr Foo walked into convenience stores in Itaewon and saw the array of hangover cures. He says: "We are aware that selling online is just one channel. This is a code we are trying to crack."