

Growing old disgracefully

It's true: hangovers really do get worse as you get older. KATE REW investigates the best ways to ease the pain

For many people, the morning after the night before heralds dismal day-long thirst, headaches, lethargy and that "never again" feeling.

If you are over thirty, the chances are that those symptoms feel twice as bad and take twice as long to go. And it's not all in your mind: many experts now agree that hangovers get worse as you get older.

"It's not so much that your body is older," says the nutritionist Dr Laz Bannock, whose clients include Trudi Stryker and Sting, "it's that you've abused it for longer." Even functioning at its peak, the liver takes an hour to break down one unit of alcohol — half a pint of beer, a small glass of wine or a pub measure of spirits. So three pints equals six hours of detoxing. If the organ is slowed by accumulated damage from years of high living, its ability to deal with toxins will be reduced and the process will take longer.

In fact, research by Dr Stuart Anderson, a psychologist at Natal University in South Africa, has revealed that drinking just four cans of lager for women and six for men can result in a lack of concentration for up to 16 hours after the last drink. "If you're hung over, you may be operating with less than 100% mental efficiency for 24 hours, and studies suggest that you could be out of sorts for up to 48 hours," he says.

As you grow older, lifestyle makes the process even harder to handle. At 20, your most pressing concern is likely to be how to spend your Friday night. A decade later, mortgages, work pressures, relationships and children are likely to be competing for your limited energy.

"After you hit 30, your body needs to recover at the weekends," says Jane Scrivner, the author of the Quick Fix

Hangover Detox (Piatkus £4.99,

published in October). Spend time recovering from a hangover instead, and it's no wonder that you're still feeling grim on the morning after the morning after the night before.

While drinking may help to promote the onset of sleep, after a few hours it disturbs breathing and prevents deep, restorative sleep. And the irony is that even though sleep requirements go down with age, miss out on the minimum and you will suffer. Professor Jim Horne, from Loughborough University's Sleep Research Centre, says that this lack of sleep will, in turn, contribute to low concentration and poor decision-making the next day.

Spending hours working out and only drinking on special occasions won't help you deal with the hangovers, either. Anderson's research shows that while fitter people do tend to get rid of hangovers faster, as a result of good circulation and movement of lymph, the contrast with how great they feel normally could make their hangover symptoms more dramatic and prolonged. And according to Health Promotion England, an NHS campaign, binge drinking is harder for the liver to deal with than regular, but moderate, alcohol intake (two units a day maximum).

The good news, however, is that there are steps you can take to ease the symptoms, or at least not make them any worse. The congeners in whisky, brandy and red wine tend to

make people feel worse than drinks composed of pure ethanol (gin and vodka). As dehydration is the most prominent cause of hangover symptoms, drinking two litres of water before going out will help to combat the effects.

For many, natural remedies can also help. Bannock recommends the Heel Detox Kit (£18.95), a homeopathic remedy with a reputation for being nothing short of miraculous. It includes nux vomica, which is often prescribed by homeopaths to counteract the effects of too much food, coffee or alcohol. Kermin Booth, a naturopath at Apotheke 20-20,

suggests trying milk thistle (Veridian Milk Thistle, £14.95 for 90 capsules), a protective and regenerative herb that more than 200 scientific trials have shown to help serious liver disorders. "It's the best hangover preventer that I know. Take it with a vitamin B complex before you go out," says Booth.

Finally, you could always avoid a hangover by drinking less. Soliman Laurence, a herbalist from London's Nutri Centre, says that taking the kudzu vine before moderate drinking (Kudzu Recovery, £13.99 for 60 tablets) curbs the desire for alcohol. A little help with self-control might not go amiss — even if, at your age, you should know better.

All the supplements are available from the Nutri Centre (020 7436 0422; www.nutricentre.com).

For information about the health risks of drinking, call Alcohol Concern on 020 7922 8667

