For Some, There's Yet Another Issue With Alcohol

SHURAN HUANG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The genetic condition known as 'Asian glow' can stir up mixed emotions.

If you're of Asian descent, a single cocktail might turn your face bright red.

By AMY QIN

A holiday season that fills up the calendar with office parties, events, gatherings and festivities can wear away at even the most social of creatures. But, for some people, there is an added wild card: what has become known as the "Asian glow."

That's a euphemism for a condition that can be brought on by a single cocktail or glass of wine: a bright red face, the color often stretching from ear to ear. The Asian glow is a common condition for people of East Asian descent, almost half of whom carry an enzyme deficiency that can cause flushed countenances, elevated heartbeats and dizziness or headaches.

On TikTok and Reddit, some Asian Americans exchange tips on how to combat Asian glow through pills, patches, makeup or Pepcid AC — an antihistamine medication typically used for heartburn that has been adopted for off-label use by some Asian Americans to inhibit the "glow."

In interviews with more than a dozen Asian Americans, many said they realized they got the glow only when they first tried alcohol in high school or college.

Mark Wu, 40, recalled how his freshman year dorm mates at the University of California, Berkeley, jokingly called him "A-Glow" for the bright shade of vermilion that he would turn after drinking. "It was kind of embarrassing — not only getting red, but also not being able to hold my alcohol," said Mr. Wu, the Los Angeles-based co-founder of Discotech, a nightlife app.

Michelle Ng, 40, said she recently stumbled upon some old college photos on her laptop that years ago she had changed from color to black and white. "I was like, 'Oh yeah, those are the red pictures,'" said Ms. Ng, who lives in San Francisco and works in product marketing. "I didn't even realize that it affected me so much."

Pop culture has also surfaced the phenomenon. In ABC's sitcom "Fresh Off the Boat," which centered on an Asian American family, Eddie, the teenage son, turns beet red after trying beer for the first time, prompting his dad to recount a story about his own experience with Asian glow at a college party. While co-hosting the Golden Globes in 2019, Sandra Oh joked about handing out Pepcid AC to the cast of the film "Crazy Rich Asians" so they wouldn't "get the Asian flush."

"Wait a minute," her co-host, Andy Samberg, asked. "What's the Asian flush?"

"Don't worry," Ms. Oh replied. "This joke's not for you."

(In a statement, Kenvue, the company that makes Pepcid AC, said the product was designed "for the relief and prevention of heartburn only" and advised consumers to reach out to their health care professionals with any questions.)

Contrary to popular perception, the flush reaction is not an allergy, but rather the result of a genetic mutation called ALDH2*2 that prevents the body from fully breaking down alcohol, causing a buildup of toxins.

Researchers say it remains a mystery why the deficiency was able to spread in just a few thousand years such that it now affects around 500 million people, or as much as 8 percent of the global population. Some say the mutation may have helped people who had it fight off diseases like tuberculosis or malaria.

About 30 to 50 percent of East Asians are estimated to have the genetic mutation. Che-Hong Chen, a senior scientist at the Stanford University School of Medicine, said that the enzyme deficiency was most prevalent in areas where rice was a dietary staple, like southern China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. He said there was evidence that those who experience Asian glow are descendants of a person in southeastern China who had the original genetic mutation around 3,000 years ago.

"This person was basically the Adam or Eve of the alcohol flushing tribe," Dr. Chen said.

Many scientists have recently voiced concerns about the general health risks of moderate drinking.

Dr. Chen and other researchers say that people with the enzyme deficiency are at an even greater risk of a range of diseases like esophageal cancer, and recommend cutting back or even abstaining from drinking altogether. They say that taking antihistamines or other supplements only masks the symptoms but does not address the underlying toxins.

But the risks are not widely known, even among Asian Americans.

Growing up in Oklahoma and Florida, Alyssa Nguyen, 26, had never heard of Asian glow. Like many other Asian Americans, she learned about it only when she tried alcohol for the first time at a college party. All of a sudden, she recalled, her face was turning red, her body was getting really hot and her heart felt like it was beating out of her chest.

Ms. Nguyen said it began to affect her behavior. She started drinking only when she was in darkly lit places, or she would wait until after photos were taken. She sometimes wore turtlenecks to parties. ("Not exactly your typical college party attire," she joked.) When she moved to New York City, she quickly figured out which bars and clubs had lighting that would conceal her redness.

Now, Ms. Nguyen estimates that she gets drunk only about five times a year, and on occasions that she deems truly worthy.

"There's a lot of emotional labor that goes into prepping to drink," said Ms. Nguyen, who owns a brand design agency. "There's no such thing as a casual drink for me."

In East Asia, where Asians, of course, constitute a vast majority, the glow is much more normalized. In mainland China and Taiwan, some even see the reaction (wrongly, Dr. Chen said) as a sign of vitality. A Japanese makeup trend known as igari, which involves applying rouge across the cheeks and nose to achieve a hung-over look, has become popular on TikTok.

But in the United States, awareness of the phenomenon still lags.

Frank Zheng, 33, an entrepreneur in New York, said that when he was an undergraduate at Williams College, people constantly asked him if he was wasted when he wasn't. When he started work on Wall Street, he often found himself at happy hours and industry events worrying about whether everyone thought he was drunk.

"It's more just a sense of annoyance or frustration," Mr. Zheng said. "Like, why me, and why am I part of the unlucky 50 percent that gets the glow?"

In recent years, a crop of new supplements claiming to mitigate the symptoms has emerged. One of these supplement makers, iBlush, estimated that it sold about 82,000 tablets, gels and patches during a recent Black Friday sale, with most of its customers coming from the United States, Australia, Canada and Britain.

Lydia Li, the Australia-based founder of iBlush, said that demand for the product was much higher in Western countries than in Asia. "People get judged for not being able to handle their alcohol a lot more in Western countries," Ms. Li said.

But many Asian Americans interviewed said they had stopped caring about the redness as they had grown older. "I've come to peace with it," said Mr. Wu, the nightlife app co-founder.

The proliferation of nonalcoholic beverage options in restaurants and bars around the country has eased the social pressure to drink, many said. Weed gummies, too. (Though some said they still carried Pepcid AC around just in case.)

"I am still constantly around alcohol," said Brandon Au, 47, a San Francisco-based entrepreneur. But over the years, he realized he simply didn't enjoy drinking. And not getting the Asian glow was, of course, an added bonus. In 2025, he had a full calendar of holiday parties, with multiple events on some nights.

"I'm not going to be drinking at any of the parties," he said before the year was out. "That's my plan."

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Alyssa Nguyen, top left, with her friend Lourdes Santiago at Carousel, a bar in New York. "There's a lot of emotional labor that goes into prepping to drink," she said. Above, Che-Hong Chen, a senior scientist at the Stanford University School of Medicine.