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## An Energy Shot for the Brain

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By LAURA JOHANNES

For people looking for a dose of mental edge, a purported brain enhancer called citicoline is popping up in beverages and dietary supplements.

"What you drink when you want to think," says the label of Nawgan, a drink from Nawgan Products LLC. The St. Louis company's website invites consumers to track their mental performance with an online memory and focus test.



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

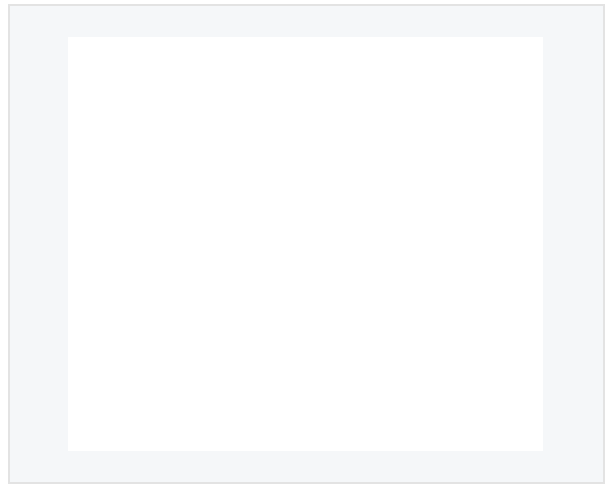
11.5 ounce cans of Nawgan

Go GungHo Inc.'s gel packets carry the slogan, "Ninja like focus" and the Orem, Utah, company hopes its newly introduced product will be popular with gamers.

Citicoline is an organic molecule found naturally in the body, particularly the brain. Scientists believe citicoline speeds up formation of brain cell membranes and may boost production of neurotransmitters essential to brain function.

In some countries, citicoline is sold as a prescription drug to help regenerate the brain after a stroke. But efforts to gain Food and Drug Administration approval in U.S. were stymied when clinical trials found citicoline was no more effective than a placebo.

In October, citicoline hit the U.S. market in liquid form as a "medical food" called CerAxon for use in patients with stroke and traumatic brain injury. Medical foods don't require FDA approval but their labels must be truthful and they can be subject to a post-market review, the FDA says. CerAxon, which is sold by Ferrer Group of Barcelona, comes in two daily doses of 1,000 milligrams each. It doesn't require a prescription, but is intended to be used under a doctor's direction, Ferrer says.



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Among a bevy of dietary supplements and energy drinks aimed at healthy people, citicoline is frequently found under the brand name Cognizin, sold by Kyowa Hakko USA, a unit of Japan's Kirin Holdings. Healthy Origins brand sells 250 milligram Cognizin capsules for "memory function and health cognition." It is currently selling for \$48 for 150 capsules. The popular 5-Hour Energy drink from Living Essentials LLC, Farmington Hills, Mich., contains citicoline in a "proprietary energy blend," but the company won't say how much. The company's website says it helps "recapture the bright, alert feeling you need to power through your day." The 1.93-ounce 5-Hour Energy shot sells for \$3 to \$5.

You'll find 250 milligrams of Cognizin in each shot of Go GungHo, now on sale for \$30 for a box of 12; and each 11.5-ounce can of Nawgan, which sells for \$2.39.



Enlarge Image

F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

A Go GungHo gel shot

Citicoline so far appears safe—with an occasional mild gastrointestinal upset being the main reported side effect. As for whether it works for sharpening the brain or minimizing damage from a stroke "the jury is out," says Catherine Ulbricht, co-founder of Natural Standard Research Collaboration, a Cambridge, Mass., scientist-owned group that evaluates natural therapies. For treating memory loss, the group

gives citicoline a grade of "C" or "unclear scientific evidence"; for stroke it gets a "B" for "positive scientific evidence."

Lee H. Schwamm, vice chairman of the neurology department at Massachusetts General Hospital, says despite inconclusive results so far, citicoline is a "reasonable" option for stroke patients because clinical trials have showed promise—such as improvement in brain scans in some patients.

Doctors say a study of more than 2,000 people funded by Ferrer—the largest ever on citicoline for stroke—may provide definitive evidence. The results will be announced in May, Ferrer says.

A Cochrane Collaboration review, last updated in 2010, looked at 14 studies and concluded there is evidence that citicoline "has a positive effect on memory and behavior at least in the medium term." The review found the most benefit in patients whose memory loss was caused by tiny strokes.

But a new Kyowa-funded study of 60 healthy women found a monthlong regime of daily doses of citicoline resulted in improved attention and fewer errors on a cognitive test compared with placebo, says co-author Deborah Yurgelun-Todd, a scientist at the Brain Institute at University of Utah in Salt Lake City, who is a paid consultant to Kyowa. The study was presented at a medical conference in June.

For memory loss, "I would urge caution but it might be worth a try," says Gary Small, director of the Longevity Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has no connection with any company selling citicoline. Exercise and a diet rich in antioxidants are likely more important for healthy people simply interested in boosting their brain function, adds Dr. Small.

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