

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Prevagen’s Improved Memory Claims are Misleading”

In the absence of a simple answer to the complex problem of dementia and cognitive decline, unproven “brain boosters” like Prevagen continue to see widespread commercial success. So, we need an honest scientific interpretation of the evidence. Dementia refers to a loss of brain function that interferes with daily living and is beyond what can be attributed to normal aging. In 1906, German physician, Alois Alzheimer identified this debilitating dementia, which will claim one in 10 baby boomers. This results in annual costs of \$148 billion. Women, African-Americans and Hispanics are at an increased risk, as are those with diabetes and heart disease. Fear of these dreaded diseases has created a \$2 billion per year industry and the internet is abuzz with advertisements claiming to improve your brain function. Also known as “smart drugs” and “cognitive enhancers,” nootropics are any substances designed or purported to enhance cognition, including memory, attention, creativity, or overall intelligence. Products such as "Brain Awake," "Dementia Drops" and "Food for the Brain," which claim to ease "forms of dementia such as Alzheimer's disease" are being investigated. Senator Claire McCaskill is the ranking member on the Senate Aging Committee said, "Frankly, I think there's a special place in hell for someone who markets a product and says it will cure Alzheimer's. You could just take a “Shot of Genius,” that promise to make you smarter, including Prevagen. But millions have joined the craze. The global nootropics market was valued at \$2.17 billion in 2018. Where Prevagen goes, the bold claims are sure to follow. According to its packaging and website, the supplement safely improves memory—specifically, the mild memory loss associated with aging. But each claim is followed by a tell-tale asterisk that leads you to the following fine print: “These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.” Nootropic supplements include certain B vitamins, fish oil, and herbal supplements like Ginkgo biloba. Studies suggest that all of these supplements can play a part in maintaining adequate nutrition and brain health, but none appear to have the superhuman brain-boosting power marketers often claim they do. Prevagen promises it “improves memory’ and ‘supports healthy brain function, sharper mind, clearer thinking.” Never mind that the main ingredient in jellyfish (apoeaquorin) has no known role in human memory, or that many experts believe supplements like this would most likely be digested in the stomach and never wind up anywhere near the brain.

In the America that I love, we could mentally benefit by exercising, eating better, reading, cultivating meaningful relationships, and finding a fulfilling hobby. Claims surrounding brain boosters are unsubstantiated and misleading.

Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate

27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444

985-229-6955 Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell

rhowesmd@hughes.net | www.iwillfindthecure.org

