Have you ever forgotten where you put your keys and searched your apartment high and low? Or perhaps, more than once, you forgot the name of someone who had just told you his name. Or maybe you make a shopping list even when your prospective purchases are few.

Through its mail-order facility and health food stores in New York and New Jersey, The Vitamin Shoppe offers "energy boosters" such as "Memory Power" and "Recall Support." The company's June 1997 catalog describes Memory Power, whose regular retail price is $14.95 per 100-tablet bottle, as a provider of "a natural complex of herbs and nutrients that help brain functions." It describes Recall Support, whose regular price is $16.95 per 100-tablet bottle, as "a nutritional formula to enhance learning and memory." According to the catalog, these supplements share as major ingredients the six substances described below.

* Ginkgo biloba extract, with Ginkgo heterosides standardized to 24 percent

The expression "ginkgoheterosides" in the catalog's ingredient list for Recall Support may be impressive. But a heteroside is simply any chemical complex that decomposes to sugars and nonsugars. (The prefix hetero- means "different." The suffix -ide means "group of related chemical compounds.") Ginkgo heterosides break down to sugars and pigments.
* l-phenylalanine
  Phenylalanine is an essential amino acid. The prefix "l" stands for "levorotatory" a structural characteristic without which amino acids are unusable by the human organism.

* l-glutamine
  Glutamine is a nonessential amino acid.

* choline
  Choline is a nutrient that is dietarily inessential for normal adults. It is a constituent of lecithin (a component of nerve tissue).

* gotu kola
  Gotu kola is an herb commonly used in Sri Lanka as a hot-beverage or salad ingredient. Unlike kola an herb that contains caffeine gotu kola is not a stimulant.

* RNA
  RNA, or ribonucleic acid, is a constituent of all living cells and many viruses. Humans digest any RNA or DNA they consume.

The catalog lists other substances as major ingredients of Memory Power and Recall Support that the supplements do not share: DNA, lecithin (a phospholipid that contains choline), phosphatidylserine (a phospholipid that contains serine, a nonessential amino acid), magnesium, Panax ginseng extract, and vitamin B6. The catalog describes another product depicted on the same page Phosphatidylserine Complex as "an exciting breakthrough in the field of optimum brain nutrition."

But the catalog does not state why a consumer should choose any one of these three products over the other two, or whether a consumer should take all three supplements daily to superboost memory.

Maybe the copywriter forgot. Maybe he or she was taking all three supplements daily and still forgot. Forgetfulness in users of any of these supplements would not be far-fetched, since scientific research supports the use of only one of all the aforementioned ingredients to treat memory loss: Ginkgo biloba extract (GBE).

But there's at least one catch: Scientific research has demonstrated only that GBE is effective against ailments due to cerebral ischemia, a decrease in blood supply to the brain caused by constriction or obstruction of blood vessels. Short-term memory loss is such an ailment. Moreover, scientific research has demonstrated GBE's effectiveness primarily in geriatric patients. There is no evidence that taking GBE, at any dose, improves the memory of persons without cerebral ischemia. Noted plant-drug authority Dr. Varro E. Tyler states: GBE has been proven effective only in cases of impaired peripheral (including cerebral) circulation, not in normal persons. It is also quite useful in treating intermittent claudication in the
legs [limping due to ischemia].

Gingko pills are dietary supplements in the United States. But in Europe GBE is available as an approved drug, and the recommended dose for tablets is 40 milligrams of GBE three times daily. Both Memory Power and Recall Support purportedly provide 25 milligrams of GBE per two tablets. Memory Power's label states that adults should take "one or more" tablets daily. Recall Support's label states that adults should take two tablets daily. The suggested intake for Recall Support thus provides less than 21 percent of the GBE dose recommended in Europe. Taking 25 milligrams of GBE daily probably will not relieve any symptoms of cerebral ischemia.

Unlike severe memory loss, occasional lapses of memory are commonplace and seldom warrant alarm.

Look at the people depicted in the poster for Recall Support. I imagine they're upset because they've wasted their money on this supplement!

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