

# ACE-HIGH

What were The Verve on about? According to our resident nutritionist, **Drew Price**, the drugs do work – and here's the proof...

**I** imagine there was a range of substances you could take that would give you an extra edge at the poker table.

What if I told you there's a range of chemicals that people you are playing against may already have taken to raise their game? Would you be interested in finding out more? Maybe you'd be interested in taking them yourself?

Okay, well there's this little fella called 1,3,7-trimethylxanthine that works a treat. It increases your concentration and focus, but it's also poisonous in high concentrations and is so strong many athletes are dope-tested for it! Still interested?

I can see you backing off. Poker's a game, not something worth risking your life over. And besides, you don't want to start taking banned substances. That

would be stupid and reckless, wouldn't it? Wrong! The mouthful I just mentioned is better known as caffeine, one of the most widely used and abused drugs in the world. In fact you're probably already drinking too much of it to get the full benefit.

But is there anything else out there that's both safe and legal, will keep you sharp and just maybe help you walk away from the table in the money? Yep, loads of things. But the shops haven't caught up with the times yet, so while some of the available products are aimed at people who need a boost for weight-lifting, memory and others for people with hangovers, none are aimed at poker players. So with all the marketing and hype, which one should you choose and which should you avoid?

## WHAT'S YOUR POISON?

Look out for the following colour codes...

### STIMULANTS

I've covered caffeine and you should know the effects of too much coffee from experience. There are also much better options...

### HERBAL SUPPLEMENTS

There are a wide range of these on the market that are supposed to increase mental performance based on plant extracts. Medical science is sceptical about most of them and there's a lot of money to be made by marketing them so don't believe all the hype. On the flip side many have been used for centuries as medicines, and when you consider that many things we know today, such as aspirin, are plant-based, it's worth keeping an open mind. I should say that generally the establishment is finding more and more evidence to support some of them – even if they don't know why they work.

### NOOTROPICS

This is where things start to get exciting. Nootropics are often referred to as 'smart drugs'. There are lots of different types on the market and many are based upon prescription medicines for various disorders such as dementia and epilepsy. As such their legality depends on where you are in the world – some are prescription-only in the UK, but readily available in the US. So why mention them? Well, rules change and the internet and cheap air travel means you may not even be playing someone from, or even in, the UK.

### THE BAD STUFF

Everything we've mentioned so far is okay to take. Too much Red Bull is not advisable but there won't be any nasty side effects. But watch out for the Warning! signs – rather than help your game these little devils will drag you to the rail.

## NAME Green tea

**FROM** Any supermarket or in capsule form from [www.affordablesupplements.co.uk](http://www.affordablesupplements.co.uk) (Reflex Green Tea capsules, £11.99 for 100)

This sits firmly in the stimulant camp with its caffeine content, but that's not the whole story. Green tea contains other compounds, which may assist the work of the caffeine giving you more bang for your buck without having you consume possibly harmful amounts of caffeine. It doesn't end there though. Is cigar smoke getting in your eyes? Well, green tea contains a load of phytochemicals that function as antioxidants. It's health food baby! Due to its mild stimulatory effects, I'd recommend 'stacking' green tea with other types of supplement; the combination gives you an extra edge you're not going to get doing this alone.

### TIP

One cup an hour should be plenty. If you don't like the taste try Jasmine tea, it's exactly the same but less bitter; or you could try the capsules.

### VERDICT

3/5 A billion Chinese can't be wrong



## NAME Red Bull

**FROM** Any supermarket/newsagent

Red Bull contains a fairly large whack of caffeine and some other interesting bits and bobs: sugar, which gives you an extra energy boost; glucuronolactone, which has been shown to improve concentration and memory retention; and taurine, an amino acid that's found naturally in the diet and plays a part in keeping the membranes of nerve cells functioning properly. (There is also some evidence suggesting that it acts as a signalling agent itself, which quiets the brain down – sort of reducing the background noise in the nervous system and helping to increase focus.) Finally the carbonation that improves the 'mouth feel' also helps to push the drink through your gut, meaning these three ingredients are absorbed faster. So, a few minutes after ingesting this drink you're going to feel charged up and good to go, but beware – once the rush is over you're going to come down off all that sugar and caffeine, and that's not going to do you any favours. And consuming another to recover is just going to leave you more in the hole if the session goes on for more than a few hours.

### TIP

Use towards the end of the night and drink the sugar-free version.

### VERDICT

2/5 A decent quick boost but it sucks long-term



**NAME DMAE****FROM** www.affordablesupplements.co.uk (£22.39 for 231g – one dose is 7.7g)

DMAE? Yeah, not a catchy name but better than the non-abbreviated version: dimethylaminoethanol. This is an effective, widely available compound, much more so than many nootropics developed by pharmaceutical companies. For this reason you're going to be seeing more and more of it and related products. It's becoming really popular among athletes, especially competitive Olympic weightlifters for its ability to help the nervous system function at its best and recover from extended periods of stress – no doubt brought on by having to wear those skin tight, shiny spandex suits. We looked at Power Drive, which is a combination product that contains DMAE, but also tyrosine, vitamin B6 and a couple of other goodies, aimed at the weightlifter but very useful for the brain athlete.

**TIP** You can also get a DMAE-only supplement like the capsules by Now Foods from www.myprotein.co.uk (£8.84 for 100 capsules)

**VERDICT** 4/5 *Bring your 'A Game'*

**NAME Piracetam (aka Nootropyl)****FROM** www.nootrition.com (\$22 for 150)

This is the mackdaddy of all nootropics. It was the first 'smart drug' that was developed, and while it is legal and widely available in the US, it is classed as prescription-only in the UK. We're including it in this round-up because it's incredibly popular across the pond. If you play a significant amount of poker out there it won't be long before you're playing with someone who has taken it. It's a medication that's been trailed successfully for a wide range of diseases from dyslexia to rheumatism with very little in the way of negative side effects. It seems to work by altering the chemistry of the cell membrane making parts of them a little more fluid – this fundamental change alters many tissues and, in particular, the way signals are passed on from nerve cell to nerve cell. (Don't worry, this sounds worse than it is!) As such it has a positive effect on a range of markers for cognition and general brain performance. It has been shown to help those with diseases like Alzheimer's, as well as healthy individuals.

**TIP** You can try importing it yourself – the laws surrounding this are extremely fuzzy – but we can't personally recommend it.

**VERDICT** 5/5 *The brass Brazilians*

**NAME Spike****FROM** www.affordablesupplements.co.uk (£39.99 for 60 capsules), or in non-caffeinated form from www.biotest.net

This is another nootropic-type compound. It's based on a medication given to patients recovering from operations, aimed at stimulating their appetite and concentration. So what will you notice? After a few minutes the active ingredient causes a gradual increase in mental clarity and focus and even a slight elevation in mood for some. It's equally interesting for what you won't notice though; the effect comes without jitters or the 'confused' feeling you get with some stimulants. The manufacturer, Biotest, has taken great trouble to keep the formula (and the special 'activation process') secret but what we do know is that, once taken, it gets to work very fast – within about 20 minutes – giving a concentration boost that lasts for up to 6 hours. Not only that but the guy who helped develop it loves his poker!

**TIP** Start with one tablet only, no more than once a day and always follow the instructions!

**VERDICT** 5/5 *A premium hand*



**Cont...** →→→

**NAME** Ginseng  
**FROM**

www.naturesbest.co.uk (£9.95 for 60 tablets)

Ginseng is a family of five closely-related plants, and the three most commonly seen types are American, Siberian and Korean. In the Far East ginseng is taken as part of most herbal medicine regimes and it is now becoming very widely popular in the West due to the many purported benefits.

Most supplements are based upon the dried and powdered root. These powders contain many different compounds – among them vitamins and minerals plus ginsenosides (and 10 eleutherosides in the Siberian type). The many preparations on the market are advertised as helping treat high blood pressure, rheumatic pain, blood sugar imbalances, stress and increasing blood flow to the brain. It's all good then?

Not necessarily. While there are millions who swear by it, it's worth remembering that studies have shown that it can cause nervousness and can lower blood sugar when first used – not a good thing for your concentration.

**TIP**

I'd suggest that if you're going to use ginseng, try taking it every day over a long period to relieve general stress in your life and get you to the table a bit fresher. But don't mix it with prescription medications!

**VERDICT**2/5 *You might want to pass***NAME** Ginkgo  
**FROM**

www.naturesbest.co.uk (£9.95 for 180 tablets)

Ginkgo Biloba is a medicinal plant that has been used for many hundreds of years in China. Following clinical trials, it has become a very popular brain support supplement across Europe, most notably France and Germany. Improvements in concentration, eyesight, reduction of dementia and the signs of depression are notable effects as is its effect on sexual health! Yes, in a recent study 91 percent of female participants said taking Ginkgo improved their sex life – that might be reason alone to take it.

What is even more exciting (well, for me at any rate) is that there's loads of evidence to back it up. Hell, we even know why it works! There are two main active ingredients: glycosides and lactones, which mop up those nasty free radicals, reduce inflammation and stimulate the supply of oxygen and nutrients to the brain.

**TIP**

The older you are the more this supplement is going to help. Studies also suggest that taking it in short bursts for a few weeks is great for memory, attention and cognition. Again though, don't mix it with prescription medicines, especially anticoagulants, aspirin and psychoactive drugs.

**VERDICT**3/5 *Ante up***NAME** Acetyl-L-Carnitine  
**FROM**

www.myprotein.co.uk (£10.53 for 50 capsules)

This is an interesting compound sometimes referred to as an amino acid. It aids brain function by acting as the raw material for the production of neurotransmitters – in this case acetylcholine, the brain's number one neurotransmitter responsible for learning and memory. So yes, it's pretty important and pertinent for your average poker player, but the effects aren't as pronounced as other compounds. Acetyl-L-Carnitine also facilitates the transport of fatty acids across cell membranes – again, important for brain function – and though it's produced naturally by your body, its production declines with age, so the older you are the more this supplement is going to help. It does come with one nasty side effect though – take more than you should and you'll start smelling of old fish!

**TIP**

Don't exceed more than 2000mg per day (unless you want people to think you're a fish!)

**VERDICT**2/5 *Gets better with age***NAME** L Tyrosine  
**FROM**

www.myprotein.co.uk (£3.99 for 100g – doses of 750-1500mg a day are recommended)

Tyrosine is an amino acid, which is the building block of proteins, and you normally get enough eating a varied healthy diet. Protein-building aside, amino acids are also the starting materials of some interesting compounds found in the brain: neurotransmitters. These compounds are the singling chemicals of the nervous system controlling the functioning of your brain. If you break it down there's one big family that generally makes you sleepier and another that makes you more alert, turning your brain up to 11 as it were. This second family includes epinephrine, norepinephrine and dopamine, which control functions associated with increased cognition. And guess what? They are all made from tyrosine. The theory goes that if you feed the body more tyrosine it will produce more 'alert' transmitters over the 'sleepy' ones; and it seems to work! Make sure you stick to the dosing guidelines though, as more is not necessarily better.

**TIP**

You can combine this with a few other substances designed to increase the effect, like BodyQuick by BrainQuicken (available at www.ironscience.co.uk – £31.95 for 90 capsules)

**VERDICT**3/5 *Worth a raise*

**NAME** Ephedrine,  
Pseudoephedrine  
and Ephedra

**FROM** We ain't telling

A lot of people already take these as a stimulant – they're popular among long distance drivers – but I'm here to tell you that they're not a good idea! Not only are these types of compound a little addictive for some folk, they also won't help you a bit. You see, unlike caffeine they actually compete for the receptors of nerve cells that you need to keep functioning on a higher mental level. This means that taking a little won't help (even though you'll feel more awake, it will leave you less able to think clearly), but taking more is even worse; you're not going to look good sitting at the green baize sweating, befuddled, twitching and, ultimately, out of the game.

**TIP** Don't look at them, don't touch them and don't ever take them

**VERDICT** 0/5 Don't be fooled by these little 'zombies'



**NAME** Alcohol

**FROM** If you don't know, you're not old enough

Okay, without wanting to start sounding like your mum, here comes the bad news. Alcohol might go hand in glove with late night games, but it's not going to do your game any favours. Alcohol impairs the way that signals are communicated between nerve cells, reducing your ability to concentrate, altering the way you perceive the outside world and react to it. 'Ah!', I hear some of you say though, 'drinking makes me more confident and loosens me up'. That confidence, openness and increased sense of well-being might be useful in a nightclub when you're trying to chat up a pretty lady but it won't get you very far at the table. That over-confidence and aggressiveness can cause you to make some rash decisions – you may be seeing chances that aren't there.

**TIP** Drink sparingly, if you must

**VERDICT** 0/5 Save it for a night out



## About the author

Drew Price has a Masters degree in Nutrition and a BSc in Biochemistry as well as being certified by the American College of Sports Medicine. He has worked with clients ranging from professional athletes to the elderly and those with chronic disease. He also lectures on nutrition, biochemistry and physiology. [www.drewprice.co.uk](http://www.drewprice.co.uk)

## Don't expect any miracles

All the supplements mentioned are exactly that – supplemental to a healthy dose of card knowledge and savvy poker skills. Clearly, if you don't know your game, haven't learnt the odds or practised studying your opponents, then these supplements aren't going to transform you into a world class player. In fact, even if you have, they won't make you a pro overnight, nor will they be of any use if you take more than recommended.

What they may do, however, is keep you more aware for a little longer, concentrating more fully, sharpen your memory and possibly give you that important edge you need so you can walk away with the pot or stop you getting cleaned out! As with anything, be careful and follow the guidelines – they're there for a reason.

## Boring bits

Before you start taking the hard stuff, a quick word about food and water. Properly used these two things are going to help your poker more than anything you can put in your mouth (unless you can fit a pair of Aces under your tongue). If a footballer gets dehydrated then he's not able to perform so well and the same is true for the 'brain athlete' – your ability to stay focused and think properly is ruined. Make sure that you get upwards of two litres of water a day, more if the weather is hot like Vegas, or you're physically active.

Diet is also crucial. Your brain chews up an incredible amount of energy just thinking so you need a balanced diet with lots of variety. You want to avoid the high G.I. white starchy carbs as well as sugars. Eating a load of these will leave you feeling tired and lethargic later on. Not good. Before a big game give white breads, pastas and potatoes a miss, and take the wholegrains and brown carbs option.

