

Care Partner Information

Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia Caregiving Tips

Drugs for Memory Loss in Alzheimer's Disease

Several drugs are available to treat memory loss in people with Alzheimer's disease. They are sometimes used in other forms of dementia, too. But, they are mainly for Alzheimer's disease.

In some people with Alzheimer's, these drugs can help improve memory. They can also cut down on confusion and help with thinking, talking, and judgment.

Don't expect any big changes. These drugs only improve memory. They don't get memory back to normal and they don't cure Alzheimer's disease. Memory will still get worse over time. After 6 months to a year, memory will usually be worse than when the medicine was started.

These drugs don't help everyone. They only help about half of people with Alzheimer's. Perhaps most important, these drugs do not cure Alzheimer's disease or any other form of dementia. They only boost memory for a while, and dementia will still get worse.

What Are The Drugs?

Names of drugs can be confusing because each drug has two names. There is a generic name and a brand name. Even though they have different names, they are the same medicine.

Dementia has different stages: early, moderate, severe. As shown in the table below, one drug can be used in any stage. Others are used only in the early or moderate stages. Yet another drug is used in the moderate to severe stage of dementia.

Drugs Used for Memory Loss in Dementia		
When to Use the Drug	Generic Name	Brand Name
All stages of dementia	Donepezil	Aricept
Early to moderate dementia	Galantamine	Razadyne
	Rivastigmine	Exelon
Moderate to severe dementia	Memantine	Namenda

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and promotoras care for someone with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias. The information in the series offers general advice and does not distinguish between the different types of dementia.

What Are the Side Effects?

Most people don't have problems with these drugs, but all drugs sometimes have side effects. Side effects are unwanted problems. The side effects might be mild and easy to live with, such as a mild headache. Sometimes they may be serious, like severe dizziness, and the drug should be stopped. If side effects happen, report them to the doctor.

In addition to looking for side effects, you should learn the names of the drugs being taken. Be sure the person with dementia is taking the correct drug at the correct dose.

Common Side Effects of Drugs Used for Memory Loss	
Drug	Side Effect
Aricept, Exelon, Razadyne	Upset stomach
	Diarrhea
	Not wanting to eat
Namenda	Dizziness
	Confusion
	Headache
	Constipation

How Do You Know if the Drugs Are Working?

It can be hard to tell if the drug is working because improvements in memory are often small. If you see even a little improvement, it probably is helping.

What If the Doctor Suggests Stopping the Drug?

As memory gets worse and worse, many doctors will suggest stopping the drugs. That's because they won't help much any more, even if they seemed to work at first. They might also be stopped sooner because of side effects, or if they never seemed to work at all.

It might be upsetting if the doctor suggests stopping the drug. But keep in mind that these drugs do not cure dementia. Dementia will still get worse, whether taking the drugs or not.

Useful Websites

US Alzheimer's Association: http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_standard_prescriptions.asp

UK Alzheimer's Association: http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=147

Information about stopping memory drugs: http://alzheimers.about.com/od/medication/a/medic_stop.htm

Written By: Mindy J. Fain, MD, University of Arizona Center on Aging

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Edited by an interprofessional team from the University of Arizona Center on Aging,
Alzheimer's Association - Desert Southwest Chapter and Community Caregivers