

Alzheimer's Disease Medications

Several prescription drugs are currently approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat people who have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Treating the symptoms of Alzheimer's can provide patients with comfort, dignity, and independence for a longer period of time and can encourage and assist their caregivers as well. It is important to understand that none of these medications stop the disease itself.

Treatment for Mild to Moderate Alzheimer's

Medications called cholinesterase inhibitors are prescribed for mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease. These drugs may help delay or prevent symptoms from becoming worse for a limited time and may help control some behavioral symptoms. The medications include: Razadyne[®] (galantamine), Exelon[®] (rivastigmine), and Aricept[®] (donepezil).

Scientists do not yet fully understand how cholinesterase inhibitors work to treat Alzheimer's disease, but research indicates that they prevent the breakdown of acetylcholine, a brain chemical believed to be important for memory and thinking. As Alzheimer's progresses, the brain produces less and less acetylcholine; therefore, cholinesterase inhibitors may eventually lose their effect.

No published study directly compares these drugs. Because they work in a similar way, switching from one of these drugs to another probably will not produce significantly different results. However, an individual with Alzheimer's may respond better to one drug than another.

Aduhelm[™] (aducanumab) is the first-of-its-kind FDA approved therapy to target aggregated forms of Amyloid beta found in the brains of people with Alzheimer's disease to reduce its buildup. It is approved for adults with early stages of the disease who have mild cognitive impairment or mild dementia. The FDA is requiring a post-approval study, known as a phase 4 confirmatory trial, to verify the drug's clinical effects.

Treatment for Moderate to Severe Alzheimer's

A medication known as Namenda[®] (memantine), an N-methyl D-aspartate (NMDA) antagonist, is prescribed to treat moderate to severe Alzheimer's disease. This drug's main effect is to delay progression of some of the symptoms of moderate to severe Alzheimer's. It may allow patients to maintain certain daily functions a little longer than they would without the medication.

Namenda[®] is believed to work by regulating glutamate, an important brain chemical. When produced in excessive amounts, glutamate may lead to brain cell death. Because NMDA antagonists work very differently from cholinesterase inhibitors, the two types of drugs can be prescribed in combination.

The FDA has also approved Namzaric[®], a combination of Namenda[®] and Aricept[®], for the treatment of moderate to severe Alzheimer's disease.

Medications to Treat Alzheimer's Disease

This brief summary does not include all information important for patient use and should not be used as a substitute for professional medical advice. Consult the prescribing doctor and read the package insert before using these or any other medications or supplements.

DRUG NAME	DRUG TYPE AND USE	HOW IT WORKS	COMMON SIDE EFFECTS	FOR MORE INFORMATION ON SAFETY AND RECOMMENDED DOSAGE
Aduhelm™ (aducanumab)	Disease-modifying immunotherapy prescribed to treat mild cognitive impairment or mild Alzheimer's. Administered as an intravenous infusion.	Removes abnormal beta-amyloid to help reduce the number of plaques in the brain	Amyloid-related imaging abnormalities (ARIA), which can lead to fluid buildup or bleeding in the brain; also headache, dizziness, falls, diarrhea, confusion	For current information about the drug's safety and use, visit https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/drugsatfda_docs/label/2021/761178s003lbl.pdf
Aricept® (donepezil)	Cholinesterase inhibitor prescribed to treat symptoms of mild, moderate, and severe Alzheimer's. Administered as a tablet or orally disintegrating tablet.	Prevents the breakdown of acetylcholine in the brain	Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, muscle cramps, fatigue, weight loss	For current information about this drug's safety and use, visit www.aricept.com/prescribing-and-patient-info .
Exelon® (rivastigmine)	Cholinesterase inhibitor prescribed to treat symptoms of mild to moderate Alzheimer's. Administered as a capsule or a patch (for severe Alzheimer's).	Prevents the breakdown of acetylcholine and butyrylcholine (a brain chemical similar to acetylcholine) in the brain	Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, weight loss, indigestion, muscle weakness	For current information about this drug's safety and use, visit https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/drugsatfda_docs/label/2015/020823s032,021025s022lbl.pdf
Namenda® (memantine)	N-methyl D-aspartate (NMDA) antagonist prescribed to treat symptoms of moderate to severe Alzheimer's. Administered as an orally ingested tablet, oral solution, or extended-release capsule.	Blocks the toxic effects associated with excess glutamate and regulates glutamate activation	Dizziness, headache, diarrhea, constipation, confusion	For current information about this drug's safety and use, visit www.namenda.com
Namzaric® (memantine extended-release and donepezil)	NMDA antagonist and cholinesterase inhibitor prescribed to treat symptoms of moderate to severe Alzheimer's. Administered as a capsule.	Blocks the toxic effects associated with excess glutamate and prevents the breakdown of acetylcholine in the brain	Headache, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, dizziness	For current information about this drug's safety and use, visit www.namzaric.com . Click on "Prescribing Information" to see the drug label.
Razadyne® (galantamine)	Cholinesterase Inhibitor prescribed to treat symptoms of mild to moderate Alzheimer's. Administered as a tablet or extended-release capsule.	Prevents the breakdown of acetylcholine and stimulates nicotinic receptors to release more acetylcholine in the brain	Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, decreased appetite, dizziness, headache	For current information about this drug's safety and use, visit https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/drugsatfda_docs/label/2020/021169s033,021615s024lbl.pdf

*Available as a generic drug.

Source: www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publication/alzheimers-disease-medications-fact-sheet