

# Treating Alzheimer's Disease: Does Medication Help?

## What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's is a disease that destroys cells in the brain. Over time, people with Alzheimer's become unable to reason, to learn, or to remember. Their behavior and personality also change.

Alzheimer's is the most common cause of dementia, or mental decline, in older people. More than five million Americans have Alzheimer's.

## How is Alzheimer's diagnosed?

Alzheimer's is not always easy to diagnose, especially during the first years. Doctors can do tests of memory and thinking. And they may do blood tests, CT scans, or MRIs. CT scans and MRIs take pictures of the brain, a little like X-rays. These tests help make sure that you do not have a condition with symptoms similar to Alzheimer's, such as a stroke or a brain tumor.

## Can Alzheimer's be prevented?

No one knows what causes Alzheimer's. And there is no sure way to prevent it. Physical activity, such as walking every day, may help prevent it. Factors that may increase the risk of Alzheimer's include smoking, diabetes, and high cholesterol.



Keeping your mind active by doing things such as crossword puzzles or playing bridge may help protect against Alzheimer's.

## Can Alzheimer's be delayed or slowed down?

There are drugs that are used to treat Alzheimer's. The drugs may slow mental decline and ease symptoms in some people. However, most people do not get much help from them. Several other treatments have also been studied. These include dietary supplements, ibuprofen (brand names Advil and Motrin), and some cholesterol drugs (statins). But none has been shown to help.

## What should I know about Alzheimer's drugs?

There are four main drugs used to treat Alzheimer's. They are listed on the other side of this fact sheet. A fifth drug, tacrine (brand name Cognex) is rarely used, because it can cause serious liver damage.

Studies show that the drugs usually do not relieve symptoms or slow down the disease. As the disease becomes worse, the drugs are even less likely to help.

**Alzheimer's drugs have side effects.** They cause side effects in more than half the people who take them. One out of every four or five people stops taking a drug for Alzheimer's because of the side effects. They can include:

- Dizziness or slow heartbeat
- Nausea, vomiting, or headaches
- Stomach pain and bleeding

**Alzheimer's drugs can interact in dangerous ways with other drugs.** They can interact with aspirin, anti-inflammatory drugs (Advil and generic ibuprofen), some drugs for heartburn, and some antibiotics.

**The drugs are expensive.** The drugs can cost from \$177 to over \$400 a month. Medicare Part D may cover some of the cost, but your cost can still be high.

## Our advice:

We do not recommend any of the Alzheimer's drugs as *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*. Most people do not benefit from them. The drugs also have many side effects. And, they can cost a lot of money.

# Drugs to Treat Alzheimer's Disease

We do **not** recommend any of the drugs as *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs* because they will not relieve symptoms or slow down the disease for most people. And they are costly and have side effects.

However, we know that many people will want to try a drug if there is any chance that it might help. In that case, we suggest generic donepezil or generic galantamine. Discuss the drugs with your doctor.

Our analysis is based on a scientific review by the Oregon Health and Science University-based Drug Effectiveness Review Project. Our analysis also took into account a 2010 evidence report conducted by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), and an evaluation conducted by the Department of Veteran's Affairs Pharmacy Benefits Management Strategic Health Group. This is a summary of a longer, more detailed report you can find at [www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org](http://www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org).

| Generic Name and Strength                   | Brand Name | Average Cost per Month |
|---|------------|------------------------|
| Donepezil tablet 5 mg                       | Aricept    | \$363                  |
| Donepezil tablet 5 mg                       | Generic    | \$208                  |
| Donepezil tablet 10 mg                      | Aricept    | \$352                  |
| Donepezil tablet 10 mg                      | Generic    | \$203                  |
| Donepezil dissolvable tablet 5 mg           | Generic    | \$240                  |
| Galantamine tablet 4 mg                     | Generic    | \$196                  |
| Galantamine tablet 8 mg                     | Generic    | \$183                  |
| Galantamine sustained-release capsule 8 mg  | Generic    | \$177                  |
| Galantamine sustained-release capsule 16 mg | Generic    | \$179                  |
| Memantine tablet 5 mg                       | Namenda    | \$269                  |
| Memantine tablet 10 mg                      | Namenda    | \$266                  |
| Memantine oral solution 10 mg/5 mL          | Namenda    | \$489                  |
| Rivastigmine capsule 1.5 mg                 | Generic    | \$222                  |
| Rivastigmine capsule 3 mg                   | Generic    | \$224                  |
| Rivastigmine capsule 6 mg                   | Exelon     | \$316                  |
| Rivastigmine capsule 6 mg                   | Generic    | \$230                  |

**Note that other strengths are available.**

Prices are based on nationwide retail average prices for January 2012. *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs* obtained prices from data provided by Wolters Kluwer Pharma Solutions, which is not involved in our analysis or recommendations.