

Alzheimer Society

Alzheimer's disease

Treatment options



Treatment options

Recent research has greatly improved our knowledge of Alzheimer's disease. Treatments for the disease are now available that may help to alleviate some of the symptoms.

The tremendous advances in Alzheimer research have created optimism that more and better treatments are on the horizon. The information provided here is a brief overview of the treatments that are currently available.

Pharmacological treatment

Several medications are available that can help with some of the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease such as decline in memory, language, thinking abilities and motor skills. Although there is currently no cure for the disease, those who respond to medication can experience improvements in their quality of life that may last for several years. It is important to remember that people respond differently to treatments and not everyone will respond to these medications.

Cholinesterase inhibitors

In Alzheimer's disease, nerve cells in the brain become damaged. Cholinesterase inhibitors aim to preserve the ability of damaged nerve endings to transmit messages from one nerve cell to another.

The following medications are cholinesterase inhibitors:

- Aricept® (also known as donepezil)
- Rivastigmine (also known as Exelon®)
- Reminyl® ER (also known as extended release galantamine hydrobromide)

These medications may be considered for people whose symptoms are early to middle stage and Aricept® has been approved for treatment of early, middle and late stage Alzheimer's disease. Differences among these medications may cause someone to respond to one but not another. Depending on the medication, different side-effects may be experienced. These medications may be helpful for two to three years, possibly longer. Eventually nerve endings degenerate to the point that the medications are no longer helpful.

Memantine hydrochloride

Neurotransmitters send messages across the space between nerve cells. As Alzheimer's disease progresses, the neurotransmitter glutamate leaks out of nerve cells and is re-absorbed at levels that are toxic to the cell.

Memantine hydrochloride, known by the trade name Ebixa®, works by blocking the re-absorption of glutamate into nerve cells. It is the first drug therapy approved for individuals whose symptoms are middle to late stage.

Ongoing research suggests that there may be greater benefit to using cholinesterase inhibitors and memantine hydrochloride together. However, more and larger trials are needed to confirm these results.

Medications are also available to help manage symptoms such as sleep disruption. Talk to your doctor to determine whether other treatments may be helpful for you or the person you are caring for.

Medications for people diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease are only available by prescription to those under the care of a doctor.

***Note:** These medications are covered under provincial drug plans in Canada, provided that individuals meet specific clinical criteria for entitlement. However, individuals may be required to cover some of the costs associated with these medications. These medications are also covered by most private insurance plans.*

Non-pharmacological treatment

Treatments for early to middle stage called "Cognitive Behavioural Therapies," "Cognitive Rehabilitation," or "Behavioural Therapy" are therapeutic approaches which use a combination of basic behavioural and cognitive training sessions. These treatments are being increasingly used in combination with cholinesterase inhibitor medications.

Complementary and alternative health care covers a broad range of therapies and healing practices. Acupuncture, chiropractic and naturopathy are some of the most familiar forms.

Some non-pharmacological therapies (such as music therapy, aromatherapy, pet therapy, and massage) may help people with Alzheimer's disease. However, lack of research prevents us from determining the effectiveness of many alternative treatments. The Alzheimer Society is funding projects in these areas to identify beneficial therapies for people with the disease.

When considering the use of natural health products, think about the following to minimize your risk:

- Don't assume "natural" means "safe."
- Be wary of unsubstantiated health-related claims.
- Herbal remedies can change the way prescription drugs work. Be aware of interactions with other medications and tell your doctor and pharmacist about any herbal remedies you may be taking.

Clinical trials

Medications that may stop the progression of Alzheimer's disease are currently in clinical trials. For additional information on research and clinical trials please see the resource list on the reverse of this brochure.





When considering any treatment, it is important to consult with your doctor or other qualified health-care professional.

When considering using any product, including a natural health product, discuss these questions with your health-care professional.

1. What are the potential benefits or results of taking this product?
2. Is this the best product or approach to achieve these results or are there better alternatives?
3. What are the risks associated with taking this product?

Ongoing communication with your health-care professional will help you find the best treatment options, discuss side-effects and other issues, and ensure that the treatment is effective and appropriate for you or the person with Alzheimer's disease you support.

Additional information and resources:

Available from your local Alzheimer Society or at www.alzheimer.ca:

- **Information sheets** medications including possible benefits and side effects.
- **Drug approval process:** information about participating in research studies and a checklist. Visit www.alzheimer.ca/researchportal.
- **Heads up for healthier living:** information on lifestyle choices that can improve the quality of life for people living with Alzheimer's disease and may help to slow the progression of the disease.
- **Alzheimer's disease and current research:** information on known risk factors, current treatments, and recent research into new treatments and the search for a cure.
- **First steps:** information for individuals with the disease and caregivers to help them understand the changes they are experiencing, plan for the future and live life to the fullest.

The **Alzheimer Society** is Canada's leading nationwide health charity for people living with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Active in communities right across Canada, the Society:

- Offers information, support and education programs for people with dementia, their families and caregivers
- Funds research to find a cure and improve the care of people with dementia
- Promotes public education and awareness of dementia to ensure people know where to turn for help
- Influences policy and decision-making to address the needs of people with dementia and their caregivers.

For more information, contact your local Alzheimer Society or visit our website at www.alzheimer.ca.

Help for Today. Hope for Tomorrow...[®]

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