

Treatments for Alzheimer's Disease

A Quick Guide for Patients and Caregivers

By Kelsey F. Lee, PharmD candidate 2011
Preceptor: *Demetra Antimisiaris, PharmD*
University of Louisville Dept. Family Medicine and Geriatrics

Important Facts about Alzheimer's Disease¹

5.3 million Americans (1 out of every 8 people age 65 and older) have Alzheimer's disease.

The primary risk factor for developing Alzheimer's disease is advancing age, although it is not considered a part of normal aging.

Alzheimer's disease occurs when nerve cells in the brain begin to fail and die. This decreases the amount of certain chemicals required for complete brain function.

Alzheimer's disease is progressive in nature. The medications used to treat Alzheimer's disease are designed to slow the onset and progression of symptoms.

Common Medications for Alzheimer's Disease

Aricept® (donepezil), Exelon® (rivastigmine) & Razadyne® (galantamine)

All these medications work in the same way. Using more than one is not helpful.

When should one of these medications be started?

This class of Alzheimer's disease medications should be started as soon as the diagnosis is made.

What should be expected from treatment with these medications?

No medication can reverse or cure Alzheimer's disease. These drugs can slow the development and progression of symptoms.

What are the common side effects?²

Nausea, Vomiting, Diarrhea, Insomnia, Fatigue, Headache, Dizziness, Decreased Appetite

Namenda® (memantine)

This is the only drug in its class; no other medication works the same way.

When should this medication be started?

Namenda should be used as an add-on to one of the medications above. It will only be started after Alzheimer's disease symptoms have worsened.

What should be expected from treatment with this medication?

Again, this medication can only slow the progression of symptoms, not cure the disease.

What are the common side effects?²

Dizziness, Headache, Confusion, Constipation

Other Common Medical Conditions Associated with Alzheimer's Disease

Depression

Up to 40% of people with Alzheimer's Disease develop depression.³

Common symptoms of depression include:

- Loss of interest in social activities or hobbies
- Depressed mood or unusual changes in mood
- Unusual sleep patterns
- Changes in eating patterns or appetite

Strategies to decrease the risk of developing depression involve maintaining a high quality of life.

You should strive to stay physically healthy by eating nutritious foods and getting regular exercise, like a daily walk. Being socially active is very important, too. Involve yourself in activities you enjoy – play cards with a group of friends, join a book club, get involved in church activities, etc.

Appropriate medications to treat depression include:

Celexa® (citalopram), Zoloft® (sertraline)

- Both of these medications work in the same way. Using more than one is not helpful.
- These medications will often need to be adjusted for each individual.
- You should expect to see improvements in depression symptoms within 2 to 3 weeks. The effects are not immediate.

Common side effects:²

Stomach upset, Nausea, Diarrhea, Insomnia, Headache

When first starting these medications, you can experience some sedation. This passes quickly for most people.

Other Common Medical Conditions Associated with Alzheimer's Disease

Sleep Changes

Changes in sleep patterns and habits are a very common problem in people with Alzheimer's disease. Many people have difficulty falling and/or staying asleep, and are often tired throughout the day.

Sleep Hygiene strategies are simple changes that can help regulate your body's response to bedtime habits and improve sleep quality.⁴

- Go to bed and get up at the same time each day. Set an alarm.
- Only use your bed for sleep. This will help your body know that when you get in bed, it's time to go to sleep.
- Once you are in bed, if you find yourself unable to sleep, get up and do something relaxing – read a book, listen to soft music – until you feel sleepy again. Do not watch TV or use the computer, as these things will make your mind more alert.
- Keep the bedroom comfortable – maintain proper temperature, use night lights or other security objects as needed.
- Try to expose yourself to sunlight each morning to keep your natural sleep rhythms in balance.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine and nicotine, especially near bedtime.
- Avoid drinking lots of fluids near bedtime so you don't have to get up to use the bathroom during the night.
- Avoid any stimulating medications near bedtime – these include your Alzheimer's medications.
- Daily exercise is important – but avoid exercising within 4 hours of bedtime.

In some cases, your doctor may recommend a medication to help you sleep if the sleep hygiene strategies are not enough.

Appropriate sleep medications include:

Desyrel® (trazodone)

Common side effects:²

Dizziness, Daytime sedation, Headache, Nausea, Dry mouth

Medications to Watch For and Use with Caution in Alzheimer's Disease

Many medications can negatively affect how the brain and mind function. It is important to use these medications cautiously in people with Alzheimer's disease. If you currently take or are prescribed any of these medications in the future, discuss their impact on brain and mind function with your doctor or pharmacist.⁵

Medication Name:

Aleve®/Naprosyn® (naproxen)

Benadryl® (diphenhydramine)

Chlor-Trimeton® (chlorpheniramine)

Darvon®/Darvocet® (propoxyphene)

Ditropan® (oxybutynin)

Dulcolax® (bisacodyl)

Elavil® (amitriptyline)

Flexeril® (cyclobenzaprine)

Indocin® (indomethacin)

Paxil® (paroxetine)

Prozac® (fluoxetine)

Robaxin® (methocarbamol)

Tagamet® (cimetidine)

Valium® (diazepam)

Vistaril®/Atarax® (hydroxyzine)

Xanax® (alprazolam)

Commonly used to treat:

Pain, Inflammation

Allergies, Rash, Insomnia

Allergies, Rash, Itching

Pain

Bladder Problems

Constipation

Insomnia, Depression

Muscle Spasms

Pain, Inflammation

Depression, Anxiety

Depression, Anxiety

Muscle Spasms

Acid Reflux

Anxiety/Nerves

Allergies, Rash, Itching, Depression

Anxiety/Nerves

Ativan – didn't include because it's the only BZD recommended for elder use (short t1/2 and not CYP)
Skelaxin? Phenergan? Temazepam?

Paying for Your Medications

Medicare Part D⁶

Medicare Part D is the prescription drug plan offered through Medicare. There are many different plans available that vary in their medication coverage, and their premium and out-of-pocket costs. It is important to choose a plan that is right for you, which will cover the medications you take.

You become eligible for Medicare Part D when you turn 65 years old, or if you are eligible for Social Security and/or disability benefits.

Open enrollment dates for Medicare Part D are from November 15 – December 31 each year

Your plan can also be changed if you move, if you require nursing home care, or if your state Medicaid status changes.

For more information and for details on specific Part D plans, visit:

www.Medicare.gov

Prescription Assistance Programs⁷

Programs are available to help you if you are having difficulty paying for your Alzheimer's medications, including:

BenefitsCheckupRx – a service from the National Council on Aging that provides you with a personal report detailing national assistance programs you may be eligible for.

Partnership for Prescription Assistance – an access point for hundreds of assistance programs.

Together Rx Access – a prescription drug assistance card that offers discounts for patients without insurance.

More details and links to these programs can be found on the Alzheimer's Association website at:

http://www.alz.org/living_with_alzheimers_prescription_drug_programs.asp

Conclusions

The number one goal in treating Alzheimer's disease is maintaining quality of life.

If you experience any side effects from your medications or any sudden changes in your thoughts or mood, it is very important to talk to your doctor or pharmacist. Often, dose changes can be made or a different medication can be used to avoid these problems.

Doing the things you love and participating in your favorite activities will keep your life enjoyable and help decrease your risk for depression. Watch for the symptoms of depression and talk to your doctor if you experience any mood changes.

Getting proper sleep is key to maintaining brain and mind function. You will also feel better overall and have more energy to do the things you love during the day. Follow the sleep hygiene strategies and talk to your doctor about your sleep patterns if you are having problems.

Avoid medications, when possible, that can negatively affect brain and mind function. Always be aware of what medications you are taking and talk to your doctor or pharmacist before beginning any new prescription or over-the-counter medications.

Resources for more information on Alzheimer's Disease

The Alzheimer's Association offers patient- and family-friendly information on nearly all practical aspects of Alzheimer's disease. General information about the disease is available, as well as helpful resources for those living with Alzheimer's and those who are taking care of a person with Alzheimer's. Message boards and a weekly e-mail newsletter are available, as well.

Visit the Alzheimer's Association website at www.ALZ.org