

Treatments for Alzheimer's Disease

A number of treatments have shown promise in improving function or slowing the decline in Alzheimer's type dementia.

Cholinesterase Inhibitors

Three drugs in this class have been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for treating dementia. They are donepezil (Aricept), galantamine (Razadyne) and rivastigmine (Exelon). These drugs work by slowing the breakdown of a brain chemical that is active in memory and thinking. They have been shown to produce a small improvement in mental function. They are not thought to affect the speed of mental deterioration in Alzheimer's disease.

The drugs are expensive, generally costing more than \$100 a month. The most common side effects are stomach upset and diarrhea. These do not affect everyone who takes these drugs. In order to avoid this type of side effect, the medication is started at a low dose and gradually increased to the highest tolerated recommended dose. The medication is most effective at the higher dosage range. The doctor can further describe the side effects, risk, and benefits of these drugs for a particular person.

Vitamin E

Vitamin E is an anti-oxidant that is thought to slow damage to the nerve cells and delay functional decline in Alzheimer's disease. The overall effect is small, and is not seen in all studies of the treatment. Recent research identified a small increase in death rate in those taking high doses of vitamin E. Caution is therefore recommended, particularly in patients with cardiovascular disease.

Memantine

Memantine (brand name Namenda) is a new drug approved for treatment of moderate to severe Alzheimer's disease. It works on a different part of brain function than the other prescription drugs for Alzheimer's. It can be given to patients also taking Aricept or drugs like it.

Other Options

A program of exercise for the Alzheimer's patient and training in behavior management for the caregiver has been show to improve the physical and mental health of Alzheimer's patients. Brain stimulation through mental activity may help maintain function.