



The  
**Dementia  
Society**  
Ottawa and Renfrew County

# WHAT ARE THE MAIN MEDICATIONS FOR ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE?



## Cholinesterase Inhibitors in the Early/Middle Stages

In the early or middle stages, a doctor may prescribe a Cholinesterase Inhibitor. This medication may improve memory, help the person concentrate, and help with motivation. However, this medication cannot stop or slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease.

Some people also react better to one brand over another. Cholinesterase Inhibitors can go by the name of Donepezil, Rivastigmine, or Galantamine. The brand-names are Aricept, Exelon, or Reminyl.

### How do Cholinesterase Inhibitors Work?

Acetylcholine is a chemical in the brain that helps send messages from one brain cell to another. It is important for memory, motivation, and concentration. A Cholinesterase Inhibitor stops Acetylcholine from breaking down. When there is more Acetylcholine available, the brain cells can receive more messages.

Unfortunately, Alzheimer's disease leads to a loss of brain cells over time. This medication cannot increase the number brain cells available to use the Acetylcholine. This is why the medication might stop working as the disease progresses.

### Side Effects of Cholinesterase Inhibitors

Some people who take Cholinesterase Inhibitors report side effects. Side effects can include diarrhea, vomiting, muscle cramps, or low blood pressure. Other side effects can be sleep problems, tiredness, and decreased hunger. Some people report getting dizzy or falling. These side effects are more common when someone first takes the medication.



# NMDA Receptor Antagonists in the Late Stages

In the later stages, a doctor may prescribe an N-Methyl D-Aspartate (NMDA) Receptor Antagonist. This medication may improve thinking, calms the person, and reduce delusions. It can allow the person to function in their daily life for longer than they otherwise would. This medication goes by the name of Memantine and the brand-name is Ebixa.

## How do NMDA Receptor Antagonists work?

Glutamate is a chemical that the brain needs to work properly, but too much can be toxic. People with Alzheimer's disease have too much Glutamate in their brain. Glutamate attaches to specific areas on brain cells called NMDA receptors. An NMDA-Receptor Antagonist blocks the area for a short amount of time. This means that Glutamate cannot send messages into the cell.

This medication does not address the reason for all the extra Glutamate in the brain. This is why medication will stop working at some point

## Side Effects of NMDA Receptor Antagonists

Side effects are not very common. Some people might feel a little confused, dizzy, tired, have headaches or hallucinate.

# How Well Do Alzheimer's Medications Work for Other Types of Dementia?

## Vascular Dementia

These medications can have a small effect. The effect is better for a person who has both Alzheimer's disease and Vascular Dementia (Mixed Dementia). The medications can help with memory, motivation, concentration, and thinking.

## Frontotemporal Dementia

These medications are not effective for treating Frontotemporal Dementia. Some medications may even make symptoms worse.

## Dementia with Lewy Bodies

These medications may help improve thinking and attention.

## Further Readings and Resources:

- How is Dementia Treated? Online Lesson: <https://igericare.healthhq.ca/lessons/how-is-dementia-treated>
- The Science of Dementia Video - On Demand Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBR2XF4NPsk&list=P\\_LqiA3A3X-xLlqa8QwqUFCxgLTLr1hLG53&index=15&t=os](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBR2XF4NPsk&list=P_LqiA3A3X-xLlqa8QwqUFCxgLTLr1hLG53&index=15&t=os)
- More Readings on Various Topics: <https://dementiahelp.ca/understanding-dementia/resources-factsheets/>

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