



Aricept (donepezil)

Generic name: Donepezil

Available strengths: 5 mg, 10 mg tablets

Available in generic: No

Drug class: Cognitive enhancer/cholinesterase inhibitor

General Information

Aricept (donepezil) is a cognitive-enhancing medication for treating mild-to-moderate dementia of Alzheimer's disease. Deterioration of cognition and memory in Alzheimer's disease, and in other forms of dementia, may be associated with degeneration of **cholinergic neurons**. Aricept inhibits the **cholinesterase enzyme** that breaks down **acetylcholine**, a neurotransmitter. This increases brain acetylcholine levels, optimizing the function of intact cholinergic neurons and improving memory and overall cognitive functioning.

Dosing Information

The starting dosage of Aricept is 5 mg once a day. The patient should receive 5 mg/day for 4–6 weeks before the dosage is increased to 10 mg/day. A 4–6 week trial allows the patient time to adjust to the medication and prevents the many frequent side effects associated with the higher dosage. Aricept should be taken shortly before retiring at nighttime. The dosage should not exceed 10 mg/day.

Common Side Effects

The most common side effects associated with Aricept are nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, insomnia, fatigue, muscle cramps, loss of appetite, and weight loss. These effects are more frequent at the 10-mg dosage, but in most cases the side effects are generally mild and transient and usually resolve after 1–3 weeks with continued therapy.

Adverse Reactions and Precautions

Patients who are undergoing surgery should let their physician know that they are taking Aricept, because it can interact with any muscle-relaxing type of anesthesia that they may receive.

Aricept may have a slowing effect on heart rate. Patients who have a history of slow heart rate (bradycardia), who are taking medications for cardiac conduction problems, or who have a history of dizziness related to cardiac problems must be monitored closely while taking Aricept. Aricept may cause seizures in susceptible individuals, although this adverse reaction is very rare. However, seizure activity may also be a manifestation of Alzheimer's disease.

Patients with a history of asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease should be monitored closely while taking Aricept. Aricept may worsen these pulmonary diseases.

Aricept may increase gastric acid secretions. Patients who have a history of ulcers or who are taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications, such as ibuprofen or naproxen, should be monitored closely for signs of gastrointestinal bleeding.

Possible Drug Interactions

Few significant drug interactions are associated with Aricept. The clinically significant drug interactions reported with Aricept are summarized in the table below.

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| Anticholinergic agents (e.g., Cogentin) | Anticholinergic agents and Aricept, when used in combination, may oppose each other's action, reducing their effectiveness. |
| Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) (e.g., aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen) | Because NSAIDs are associated with an increased risk of gastrointestinal ulcers and Aricept may increase gastric acid secretions, this combination may enhance the risk of gastrointestinal bleeding. |
| Nizoral (ketoconazole) and Diflucan (fluconazole) | These antifungal agents may inhibit Aricept's metabolism and increase its blood levels and pharmacological actions, potentially producing adverse effects. |

Patients taking Aricept should not consume alcohol because the combination may increase sedation and drowsiness. Moreover, the sedative effects of alcohol may act as a depressant, obscuring the therapeutic effects of Aricept and complicating treatment.

Overdose

Overdose with Aricept may result in a **cholinergic crisis** resulting from high levels of acetylcholine. The symptoms of a cholinergic crisis include severe nausea, vomiting, salivation, slow heart rate, sweating, low blood pressure, muscle weakness, respiratory depression, and convulsions. Overdose with Aricept can be life threatening.

