

Dementia: What to Expect — Medications

What is happening

Many people with dementia have taken medications for years to:

- Slow memory decline
- Support thinking or daily functioning
- Help with symptoms related to dementia

Common dementia medications include:

- Aricept (donepezil)
- Exelon (rivastigmine)
- Namenda (memantine)
- Razadyne (galantamine)

These medications are often started earlier in the course of dementia.

Why medications may be reconsidered in hospice care

By the time hospice care is appropriate, dementia has usually progressed to its advanced stages.

At this stage:

- These medications are often much less likely to provide meaningful benefit
- Side effects may become more burdensome as the body weakens

Hospice care focuses on:

- Comfort
- Reducing suffering
- Simplifying care when possible

Because of this, the hospice team may recommend reviewing whether these medications are still helpful.

Possible side effects

Dementia medications may contribute to:

- Nausea
- Poor appetite
- Weight loss
- Diarrhea or bowel changes
- Sleep disturbance

- Low blood pressure
- Slow heart rate

Many of these symptoms are already common in advanced illness and may worsen quality of life.

Important understanding

Stopping dementia medications does not mean:

- The patient is being abandoned
- Care is being withdrawn
- Symptoms are being ignored

Rather, it may reflect a shift toward:

- Comfort-focused care
- Reducing medication burden
- Avoiding side effects that may now outweigh benefits

What you can do

- Review medications with the hospice team
- Ask:
 - Which medications are still helping
 - Which medications may now be causing side effects
 - Whether reducing medications may improve comfort

These conversations are very common in hospice care.

Important safety reminder

Do not stop dementia medications suddenly unless instructed by the hospice team.

Some medications should be:

- Reduced gradually (“tapered”)
- Stopped slowly over time

The hospice team can guide this process safely.

When to discuss concerns with hospice

- Appetite or weight loss worsens
- Nausea or diarrhea becomes problematic
- Sleep problems increase
- You are unsure whether medications are still helping

- You have concerns about side effects or medication burden