

# PBS subsidies for cholinesterase inhibitors: What are the conditions?

Drugs called cholinesterase inhibitors are approved for listing on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) for treating people with Alzheimer's disease who meet certain criteria. This sheet provides information about the conditions that need to be met in order to receive these medications at the subsidised rate.

## Which cholinesterase inhibitor drugs are approved for use in Australia?

Cholinesterase inhibitors are medications used to treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. Three cholinesterase inhibitors are approved for use in Australia – donepezil, galantamine and rivastigmine.

The cost of cholinesterase inhibitors is subsidised by the Australian Government through the PBS for people with Alzheimer's disease who meet certain criteria.

For further information about these drugs, see **Dementia Q&A sheet 1 Drug treatments for Alzheimer's disease: Cholinesterase inhibitors**.

For information about another drug for Alzheimer's disease and the conditions for its PBS subsidy, see **Dementia Q&A sheet 3 Drug treatments for Alzheimer's disease: Memantine**.

## What are the conditions for getting cholinesterase inhibitor drugs at a subsidised cost?

For an initial PBS subsidised prescription of a cholinesterase inhibitor (donepezil, rivastigmine or galantamine), the following conditions must be met.

## **Diagnosis**

A diagnosis of mild to moderately severe Alzheimer's disease must be confirmed by, or in consultation with, a medical specialist. Specialists who are able to confirm the diagnosis include geriatricians, neurologists, psychiatrists and other consultant physicians.

## **Cognitive assessment**

A cognitive assessment using an approved test needs to be performed. This is a simple test of memory and thinking. The Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE), the Alzheimer's Disease Assessment Scale Cognitive subscale (ADAS-Cog), and the Clinicians Interview Based Impression of Severity (CIBIS) are the tests approved for this assessment. Special arrangements can be made for testing people whose first language is not English or who have communication difficulties or hearing or sight problems.

The person with Alzheimer's disease must be in the mid to moderately severe stages of the illness (MMSE  $\geq 10$  unless this test can't be used) based on this assessment to be eligible for the subsidy.

For further information about commonly used tests and assessments, see **Dementia Q&A sheet 10 Tests used in diagnosing dementia**.

## **Authority for PBS subsidy**

The prescribing doctor must submit an authority application in writing, including the cognitive assessment score/s, but an initial 2 months' supply can be sought by telephone. Up to 6 months' supply can be obtained on the initial authority. The treatment must be the sole PBS subsidised medication for Alzheimer's disease prescribed for the person.

## **What if another type of dementia has been diagnosed?**

Clinical trials suggest that cholinesterase inhibitors may provide some benefits for people with vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies or mixed dementia. They may also provide some benefits to people who have severe Alzheimer's disease. However, the drugs are not currently approved for subsidised prescription for these conditions in Australia. They can be prescribed for these conditions and purchased at full cost.

## **Can I continue to receive medication at the subsidised rate?**

Continuing to obtain the subsidy after the first 6 months depends on whether the prescribing doctor determines that the drug is providing clinical benefits to the patient. A follow-up clinical assessment will usually be done by your GP or specialist 3 to 6 months after the first assessment. This will involve discussing what benefits, if any, the person with dementia and their family have noticed.

If the doctor determines that a clinically meaningful response has been demonstrated, they can obtain authority by telephone to prescribe the drug for a second 6 month period. Previously, an improvement on a cognitive test, usually 2 points on the MMSE, had to be demonstrated for continued subsidy after the first 6 months, but as of 1 May 2013 this was no longer the only acceptable way to determine clinically meaningful response.

A clinically meaningful response to treatment can be demonstrated in the following areas:

- Quality of life, such as level of independence or happiness
- Cognitive function, such as memory, recognition or interest in environment
- Behavioural symptoms, such as hallucination, delusions, anxiety, marked agitation or aggressive behaviour

To continue receiving the subsidy beyond the first year of treatment, the prescribing doctor can obtain approval by phone for each 6 months of therapy. Re-assessment for a clinically meaningful response must be undertaken and documented by the doctor every six months.

If sufficient benefits are not seen within the first 6 months, you should discuss with your doctor trying one of the other drugs for Alzheimer's disease, to see if a different drug provides benefits.

## **How long can I obtain the subsidised medication for?**

The subsidised medication will be available until you and your doctor decide that the medication is no longer of any benefit to you.

## **If I change from one medication to another, will the PBS subsidy be available for the other drug?**

As some people will experience side-effects from these medications, or may respond well to one drug but not another, the subsidy will be available to trial another medication. You should discuss this with your GP or specialist.

## **Should I continue to see my general practitioner?**

Your GP can undertake the follow-up assessments and provide your prescriptions. Your GP and specialist should work together concerning your care and health needs.

## **How much does this medication cost?**

### **Cost without the subsidy**

People who do not meet the criteria for the subsidy can purchase prescribed cholinesterase inhibitor drugs at full cost, which at the time of writing varies from around \$40 to \$80 for four weeks' supply, depending on the drug and dose. Some pharmacies may charge more and people are able to shop around to obtain a more competitive price.

### **Cost with the subsidy**

People who meet the conditions required by the PBS are able to purchase the prescription at the subsidised rates set each year by the Australian Government. The cost is lower for pensioners and other Health Card holders.

### **Cost to veterans**

Repatriation Health Card holders and Repatriation Pharmaceutical Benefits Card holders may receive a further cost concession; please discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist.

## Where can I find more information?

Information regarding medication and subsidies changes regularly. The latest PBS schedule is available online at [pbs.gov.au](https://pbs.gov.au). Dementia Australia will continue to provide these updates, which are also available online at [dementia.org.au](https://dementia.org.au). Your GP, specialist and pharmacist are also important sources of information.

**Dementia Australia recognises that the currently licensed Alzheimer's drugs are not a cure. It is evident however that these drugs improve the quality of life for some individuals with Alzheimer's disease.**

### Further Information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**, or visit our website at [dementia.org.au](https://dementia.org.au)



For language assistance phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**