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Vitamin E may lessen Alzheimer's symptoms

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Vitamin E may slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease symptoms among patients with mild-to-moderate cases, easing the burden for their caregivers, a study reports.

Maurice W. Dysken of the Minneapolis VA Health Care System, and colleagues assessed the effects of high-dose vitamin E; another drug called memantine; and both combined in Alzheimer's patients. The participants were already taking blood pressure drugs called acetylcholinesterase inhibitors, which had been found to reduce Alzheimer's risk.

Over an average follow-up time of 2.3 years, the vitamin E group showed slower "functional decline" than those receiving inactive pills, or placebos, the researchers said.

They measured the annual rate of decline in "activities of daily living" as dropping by an average of 19 percent in the vitamin E group. In addition, serious side effects weren't seen and caregiver time dropped by about two hours daily, the investigators said. The dosage was 2,000 international units of vitamin E daily.

The study appeared in the Jan. 1 issue of *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Neither memantine nor the vitamin E-memantine combination showed clinical benefit, though past research had found memantine beneficial in "moderately severe" cases, the scientists added.

They said the study is one of the largest and longest treatment trials in mild-to-moderate Alzheimer's patients, enrolling about 600, and sheds light on safety concerns of vitamin E reported in a 2005 study. "We found no significant increase in mortality with vitamin E. The annual mortality rate was 7.3 percent in the [vitamin E] group vs. 9.4 percent for the placebo group," they wrote.