

# UCI researchers lead study for drug to treat mild to moderate Alzheimer's

BY DEEPA BHARATH

/ STAFF WRITER

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Michelle Jones saw her grandmother suffer the degenerative effects of Alzheimer's disease for a decade.

"When she died (in her mid-80s), she was like a baby in a diaper," she said. "My grandfather took care of her through it all. But it was a significant challenge."

That motivated Jones' mother to do her part in helping find a cure. Despite having no Alzheimer's symptoms, she has been participating for the past two years in a national study that is testing an experimental drug designed to prevent rapid degeneration among patients with mild to moderate Alzheimer's symptoms, primarily increased memory loss and cognitive decline.

"Our hope is they find a drug that can help these patients," Jones said.

In Orange County, researchers at UC Irvine's Neuropsychiatric Center are helping lead this national research, called the Noble Study.

UC Irvine has put out a call for patients interested in being enrolled in the study, said Dr. Steven Potkin, psychiatrist and principal investigator for the Noble

## ARE YOU INTERESTED?

Those interested in participating in the Noble Study are asked to call Farah Toullier at 714-456-7994 or email her at [ftoullie@uci.edu](mailto:ftoullie@uci.edu). Those with specific questions about the study or treatment may contact Dr. Steven Potkin at 949-824-8040 or [sgpotkin@uci.edu](mailto:sgpotkin@uci.edu). Study volunteers will be paid \$1,600 for the duration of the study and a study partner, whose duty it is to help the volunteer get to appointments, will receive about \$300 for the duration of the study.

Information: [thenoblestudy.org](http://thenoblestudy.org)

Study at UCI.

The experimental drug, known as T817-MA, is believed to be a neuroprotective agent that stops or slows down the loss of brain tissue or neuron cells, Potkin said.



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"This compound helps protect neurons that are still functioning," he said. "Neurons are critical because they are the cells responsible for connections and the exchange of information between different parts of the brain. All neurons together allow us to see, hear, move and understand the world around us. They help us remember and problem-solve."

Potkin explained that although there are billions of neurons in an individual brain, when neuron cells die, they take with them other cells with which they interact. This, he says, is what hastens the degeneration in Alzheimer's patients. About 5 million people in the United States suffer from mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease.

Researchers for the randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled Noble study want to enroll 450 people nationwide. The duration of the treatment is about 14 months and UC Irvine is looking for about 20 volunteers who are already being treated with Alzheimer's drugs donepezil or Aricept.

Potkin said any treatment has its benefits and side effects. In prior tests, patients who took the T817-MA compound experienced side effects such as headache, diarrhea, nausea and dizziness – symptoms that are bothersome but not life-threatening, he said.

Potkin said the study is critical because in the last decade, there have been no medicines approved by the Food and Drug Administration introduced for Alzheimer's patients with mild or moderate symptoms.

Currently, most of the research into Alzheimer's disease is skewed toward prevention, said Jim McAleer, president and CEO of the Alzheimer's Association's Orange County chapter.

"Prevention is very necessary," he said. "However, we need more scientists and trial participants to help come up with a more effective drug to treat the disease."

McAleer said he hopes the drug would protect the mitochondria, the energy sources in brain cells.

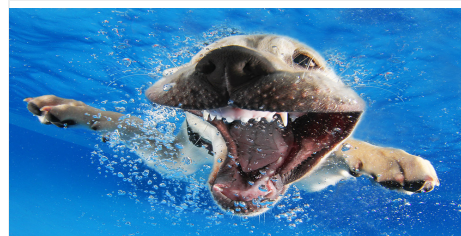
"One of the reasons you lose memory when you have Alzheimer's is because the brain loses plasticity," he said.

Potkin said he was a caregiver for his own father-in-law, who had Alzheimer's.

"I understand first-hand the challenges and the stress caregivers are under," he said. "There's a tremendous need for this kind of research and I hope people respond to our call."

**Contact the writer:** 714-796-7909 or [dbharath@ocregister.com](mailto:dbharath@ocregister.com)

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