

In January, an expert advisory panel of the FDA debated whether florbetapir was ready for marketing. The group did not suggest that the FDA approve the drug at this time. Still, the experts said they made the judgment based on available information. And they asked for more information. They also set conditions for accepting florbetapir. One condition is for the manufacturer to show evidence that florbetapir correctly identifies plaques. The other condition is that the manufacturer prepare a training program for experts in nuclear medicine. The advisory panel said the doctors reading the test need additional education to correctly identify the plaques. The Food and Drug Administration will decide next month whether to accept the panel's suggestions. The FDA normally follows the advice of its expert advisers, but not always. If it is approved, florbetapir would be the first agent permitted to measure plaque deposits in living patients. Still, the presence of plaques does not prove that a patient has Alzheimer's disease. Doctors say some people with amyloid plaques in their brains do not have the condition. An estimated thirty million people around the world have Alzheimer's disease. In the United States alone, more than five million people suffer from this presently incurable brain disorder. Alzheimer's affects memory and personality -- those qualities that make a person an individual. At first, people with the condition forget simple things, like where they left the keys to their car. But as time passes, they forget more and more. They may forget what a key is used for. Patients forget the names of their husbands, wives or children. Then they forget who they are. Finally, they remember almost nothing. It is as if their brains die before the other parts of the body. Victims of Alzheimer's do die from its effects or conditions linked to it. But death may not come for many years. Dementia is the loss of thinking ability that is severe enough to interfere with daily activities. It is not a disease itself. Instead, dementia is a group of signs of some conditions and diseases.