

The New Alzheimer's Blood Test: What p-tau217 Can (and Can't) Tell You

For decades, confirming Alzheimer's-related brain changes meant an expensive PET scan or an invasive spinal tap. That's beginning to change. A new generation of blood tests, built around a protein called p-tau217, is reshaping how – and how early – Alzheimer's-related changes can be identified.

What Is p-tau217?

P-tau217 stands for phosphorylated tau 217, a modified form of the tau protein. Tau tangles are one of the two hallmark brain changes seen in Alzheimer's disease, alongside amyloid plaques. When tau pathology begins developing in the brain, elevated levels of p-tau217 show up in the bloodstream — making it possible, for the first time, to get a meaningful window into Alzheimer's-related brain changes from a simple blood draw.

A Major Milestone: FDA Approval

In May 2025, the FDA granted its first-ever approval for a blood test to help diagnose Alzheimer's disease. The test, called Lumipulse, uses the ratio of p-tau217 to amyloid beta in the blood and was cleared for adults 55 and older who already have cognitive symptoms. In clinical validation, its results matched the outcomes of PET brain scans and spinal fluid testing about 92% of the time when positive and 97% of the time when negative — strong performance for a test that's far less invasive and less costly than the alternatives.

Since then, additional tests have followed. Roche received FDA clearance in October 2025 for a primary care version designed specifically to rule out Alzheimer's-related pathology, with a reported accuracy of nearly 98% when used to determine that a patient's symptoms are *not* related to Alzheimer's.

An Important Limitation to Understand

These tests are currently approved only for people who already have cognitive symptoms — they are not yet approved as a general screening tool for healthy, symptom-free individuals. In other words, this isn't (yet) a test you can request purely out of curiosity to check your future risk; it's designed to help doctors evaluate patients who are already experiencing concerning cognitive changes.

What's New: Predicting Risk Years in Advance

The most recent research, presented at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference in July 2026, suggests p-tau217 may eventually do more than confirm a current diagnosis — it may help predict future risk. In a study of cognitively healthy older adults, those with very high p-tau217 levels had roughly a 78% risk of developing cognitive impairment within 10 years, and about a 1-in-3 chance within 5 years. Even those with only slightly elevated levels showed a meaningfully increased risk over the same timeframes. This is exciting groundwork for the future of early detection, though it's important to note this application is still in the research phase, not yet part of routine clinical use.

What This Means for You

Whether or not this test ever becomes part of your own healthcare journey, the response to Alzheimer's risk remains the same as it's always been: protect your vascular health, stay physically active, eat well, manage stress, stay socially connected, and keep your brain engaged. A blood test can tell you what's happening – but the lifestyle habits that reduce and manage that risk are within your control today, regardless of what any test might eventually reveal.

It's never too late to protect your brain — with or without a test.

References

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