

Alzheimer's Disease Health Center

Alzheimer's Hits 5.1 Million Americans

Cases Predicted to More Than Triple -- to 16 Million -- by 2050

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March 20, 2007 – Alzheimer's disease is rising rapidly in America, now affecting at least 5.1 million and expected to hit 7.7 million by 2030; perhaps tripling to 16 million by 2050.

Those figures, released today by the Alzheimer's Association, don't tell the whole story.

For one thing, they don't include the 10 million Americans currently caring for a person with Alzheimer's disease or similar dementias. Over 40% of these caregivers are stressed to the breaking point -- financially, emotionally, and physically.

The new numbers also conceal a frightening statistic: An estimated 500,000 Americans under age 65 -- some as young as 30 -- suffer early-onset Alzheimer's disease.

Soaring upward even faster than the Alzheimer's case rate is the death rate. Deaths from Alzheimer's rose nearly 33% from 2000 to 2004. And that's an underestimate.

The cause of death for Alzheimer's patients is often wrongly attributed to other diseases such patients may have, says Stephen McConnell, PhD, vice president for public policy and advocacy at the Alzheimer's Association.

"This is not just a memory disease. It is a disease that kills you," McConnell tells WebMD. "What should really scare us is that you see a decline in cancer and heart-disease deaths but a rapid increase in Alzheimer's disease. And the two are not unrelated. As we live longer, we are more susceptible to Alzheimer's."

In 2011, baby boomers will begin turning 65 -- the age at which one in eight people has Alzheimer's. That risk rises rapidly with age. Nearly one in five people who reach 84 will get Alzheimer's disease. Those who live to be 85 or older have a 44% chance of Alzheimer's.

The new numbers come from the Alzheimer's Association's "Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures 2007." Included in this statistical abstract is a special report on the hidden cost of Alzheimer's disease: the toll it takes on caregivers and families.

Alzheimer's Caregivers Stressed Physically, Financially

McConnell says the new data now make it possible to calculate the cost of caring for Alzheimer's patients. It is a staggering figure.

"There are 10 million Alzheimer's caregivers," McConnell says. "Some have the job 24 hours a day, as at some point all Alzheimer's patients need 24-hour care."

The value of this care: \$83 billion a year, dollars not included in calculations of U.S. health care costs.

"Families are bearing a very heavy burden. And this is not covered by health insurance," McConnell says.

Alzheimer's falls into the category of long-term care, which is available only to Americans able to purchase expensive long-term care insurance or to those impoverished enough to qualify for Medicaid.

If you think you or an elderly family member can afford Alzheimer's care, you may be wrong. Two-thirds of free-living elderly people -- and 84% of those at high risk of needing long-term care -- cannot afford more than a year in a nursing home. Three-fourths of those at high risk cannot afford even a month of nursing-home care.

Why? In 2006, a private room in an assisted living facility cost \$35,616 a year. A private room in a nursing home cost \$75,190 a year. Adult day services range from \$25 to \$100 a day. And home health aids cost \$19 an hour.

"Ultimately, we need financial insurance protection so the disease doesn't bankrupt the whole family," McConnell says. "It is unfair to make a family choose between sending their child to college and taking care of their dad."

Dollars represent only the financial cost of Alzheimer's care. Two-thirds of these caregivers provide physically demanding care. This includes bathing, feeding, toilet trips, and incontinence care for patients whose confusion often leads them to struggle against the caregiver.

More than 70% of caregivers do this for more than a year -- and a third of them do it for five or more years. It's no wonder 40% of Alzheimer's caregivers report high levels of emotional stress.

The physical stress of caregiving is summed up in one awful statistic: People who care for dementia patients have an increased risk of death.

"Caregivers are doing a very important service to the country, but we need to do a better job of taking care of the caregiver," McConnell says.

SOURCES: Alzheimer's Association: "Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures 2007." Stephen McConnell, PhD, vice president for public policy and advocacy, Alzheimer's Association, Washington, D.C.
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