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Alzheimer's costs to soar without better drugs

Report urges Congress to increase funding for research on medication

By Julie Steenhuisen

Reuters

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CHICAGO - Alzheimer's disease will rack up more than \$20 trillion in treatment costs over the next 40 years in the United States, according to a report on Wednesday that calls on Congress to increase funding for drug research.

The report issued by the Alzheimer's Association found that from 2010 to 2050, the cost of caring for Americans 65 and older with Alzheimer's disease will increase more than six times to \$1.08 trillion per year.

Currently, \$172 billion a year is spent by the government, private insurance and individuals to care for people with the disease, the most common cause of dementia.

Current drugs help manage symptoms but, so far, no treatment can stop the progression of Alzheimer's, which can start with vague memory loss and confusion before progressing to complete disability and death.

Based on a model developed by the Lewin Group, a healthcare research organization owned by insurer UnitedHealth Group, the Alzheimer's Association now estimates the number of Americans 65 and older with Alzheimer's will increase from 5.1 million today to 13.5 million by mid-century.

"We know that Alzheimer's disease is not just 'a little memory loss' — it is a national crisis that grows worse by the day," Harry Johns, president and CEO of the Alzheimer's Association, said in a statement.

"Alzheimer's not only poses a significant threat to

millions of families, but also drives tremendous costs for government programs like Medicare and Medicaid."

The group said costs to Medicare, the federal health insurance program for the elderly, would rise 600 percent by 2050, from \$88 billion today to \$627 billion in 2050.

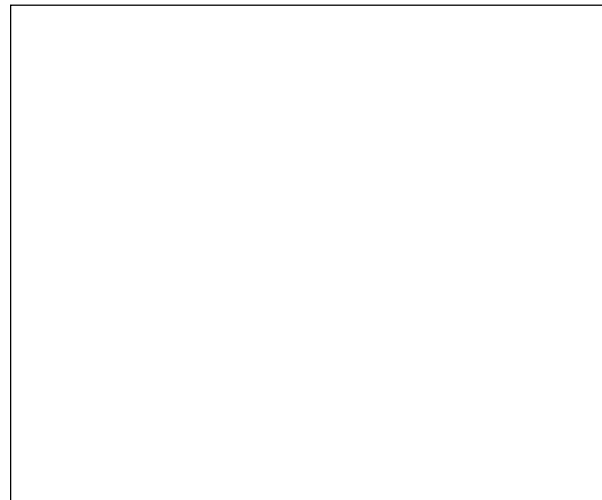
During the same time period, Medicaid costs will rise 400 percent, from \$34 billion to \$178 billion.

Driving the cost increases, they said, is the fact that by 2050, 48 percent of the projected 13.5 million people with Alzheimer's will be in the severe stage of the disease, when costly, around-the-clock care is often needed.

"Today, there are no treatments that can prevent, delay, slow or stop the progression of Alzheimer's disease," said Johns.

"While the ultimate goal is a treatment that can

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completely prevent or cure Alzheimer's, we can now see that even modest improvements can have a huge impact."

They estimate that a drug that delays the onset of Alzheimer's by five years would decrease the total number of Americans age 65 and older with Alzheimer's from 5.6 million to 4 million in 2020.

And if a drug were discovered by 2015 that slowed disease progression, it could cut the number of people in the severe stage of Alzheimer's disease in half to 1.1 million by 2020, and 1.2 million in 2050, down from the projections of 6.5 million.

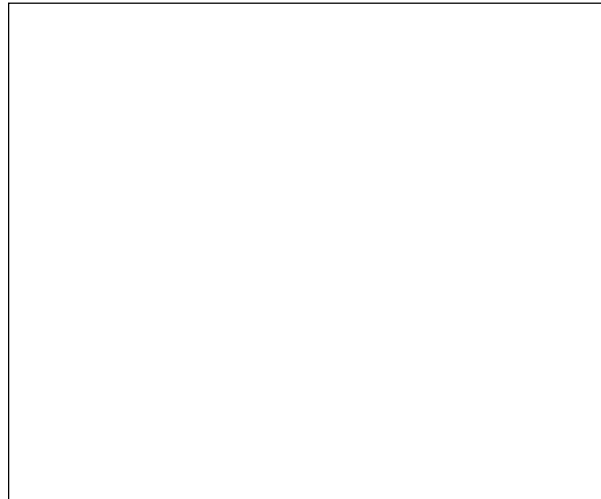
The group is asking lawmakers to enact the National Alzheimer's Project Act, which would create a national plan to overcome Alzheimer's disease.

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