

Alzheimer's to Triple By 2050 as Baby Boomers Age

By Julie Steenhuysen/Reuters

The number of U.S. residents aged 65 and older living with Alzheimer's disease is expected to nearly triple to 13.8 million by 2050 as aging baby boomers swell the ranks of those living with the brain-wasting disease, U.S. researchers said on Wednesday.

The new estimates, published in the journal *Neurology*, confirm prior estimates and make clear the need for new and better treatments for Alzheimer's, the leading cause of dementia that now affects some 5 million Americans and 38 million people worldwide.

The latest U.S. estimates paint a grim picture as more and more of the nation's baby boom generation pass the age of 65, putting them at higher risk for Alzheimer's, an age-related disorder that slowly robs its victims of the ability to think and care for themselves.

"Our study draws attention to an urgent need for more research, treatments and preventive strategies to reduce this epidemic," said study co-author Jennifer Weuve, an assistant professor of medicine at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago.

The National Institute on Aging and others say Alzheimer's represents a looming health epidemic as the population ages. Current drugs treat symptoms, but no treatments can stop the progression of Alzheimer's despite millions of dollars being spent on research.

The most recent attempts have failed or met with only faint success. Eli Lilly and Co's solanezumab failed last summer to

meet the primary goals of two studies in patients with mild to moderate Alzheimer's, but showed a slight benefit when the studies were pooled to look at the effect on those with the mildest form of the disease.

Lilly plans to start a new trial in patients with mild Alzheimer's this year.

For the latest estimates, the researchers used data on thousands of older volunteers in a community study of Alzheimer's in Chicago, combined with data on U.S. death rates, education and current and future population estimates from the U.S. census.

Rising Victims, No Cure

The researchers estimate that the total number of U.S. residents with Alzheimer's in 2050 could reach 13.8 million, up from 4.7 million in 2010. That includes about 7 million people who would be age 85 or older in 2050.

"These projections are based on assumptions that we don't have a cure at this point, and people may be living longer going forward," said Dallas Anderson of the National Institute on Aging, one of the National Institutes of Health, which funded the study along with the Alzheimer's Association.

"The baby boom bulge is finally reaching retirement age and moving into the age window of highest risk," he said.

Anderson said the study is an update of a prior report done a decade ago, and while the numbers are similar, the new assumptions are the most up to date.

"Everybody agrees that whatever the level we're at now, it's going to go up by threefold in the coming few decades," he said.

As the number of cases increases, Anderson said the strain on the U.S. healthcare system will rise, increasing calls for

greater capacity in nursing homes and demand for skilled healthcare providers.

It will also increase the strain on families, who often care for afflicted relatives until that burden becomes too great. "It's a gradual diminishment in function, and by the end it's absolutely devastating," he said.

The team at Rush said the dramatic increase in Alzheimer's should compel U.S. policymakers to prepare for it.

Last year, the Obama Administration funded the National Alzheimer's Plan, a sweeping effort to find a way to prevent or treat Alzheimer's by 2025 and improve the care of those already afflicted.

But advocates worry that huge automatic spending cuts known as "the sequester" may put those efforts at risk.

"This report confirms yet again that Alzheimer's will be the great health crisis of the 21st century. It also highlights the dire threat posed by the looming sequester and the sweeping cuts to NIH, which would mark a death knell for Alzheimer's research funding," George Vradenburg of USAgainstAlzheimer's and member of the Advisory Council on Alzheimer's Research, Care, and Services, said in a statement.