

US drafts plan to fight feared Alzheimer's disease

February 22 2012, By LAURAN NEERGAARD , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- The Obama administration declared Alzheimer's "one of the most feared health conditions" on Wednesday as it issued a draft of a new national strategy to fight the ominous rise in this mind-destroying disease.

More than 5 million Americans already have Alzheimer's or similar dementias, a toll expected to reach up to 16 million by 2050 - along with skyrocketing [medical](#) and nursing home bills - because the population is aging so rapidly.

The government's top goal: Find some effective ways to treat Alzheimer's by 2025. That's an ambitious quest. Today's treatments only temporarily ease symptoms. Scientists know that Alzheimer's brews for years before symptoms appear, but work to find better medications or at least stall the disease's emergence has been frustratingly slow.

Whether scientists can meet that deadline or not, the draft of the first National Alzheimer's Plan also makes clear that overwhelmed families need help right away to care for affected loved ones.

Moreover, as many as half of today's Alzheimer's sufferers haven't been formally diagnosed, and the draft in part blames [stigma](#) and [misinformation](#).

Among the draft's planned steps:

-Conduct a major public awareness campaign to help people know the early warning signs of Alzheimer's and what to do.

-Educate doctors and other [health workers](#) about how to recognize Alzheimer's, what medications are available now that can help with the disease's symptoms, and what [social services](#) may help families to cope.

-Improve early detection, in part by determining the best cognitive screening to offer during Medicare's new annual wellness visit.

-Improve training of [caregivers](#), so they know what resources are available and how to handle common [behavior problems](#) of dementia. Research shows that caregivers given such training are able to keep their loved ones at home for far longer.

-Study how to address the health needs of stressed and isolated caregivers.

Then there's the goal of better treatments. The National Institutes of Health spends about \$450 million a year on [dementia](#) research. Earlier this month, the Obama administration announced it would add an extra \$50 million to that tab this year, and seek \$80 million more to spend on Alzheimer's research in 2013.

It plans to spend about \$26 million on some of the plan's other provisions.

For comparison, the government spends nearly \$3 billion on AIDS research; about 1.1 million Americans are living with the AIDS virus.

Wednesday's draft is open for public comment through March, and the government's Alzheimer's advisory council is sure to make changes before a final strategy is issued later this year. But some of the work isn't

waiting: The NIH, for example, is bringing together top Alzheimer's scientists in May to discuss the most promising leads for better treatment.

Some members of that advisory council called the draft a good first step.

"They've covered the right topics. What is needed now is more detail," said Alzheimer's Association President Harry Johns. "There's real recognition at this point that Alzheimer's is devastating for not only the individual but for the families and caregivers."

"Today, with the strong commitment of federal leaders and louder outcry from the public, the urgency of the Alzheimer's disease crisis is being recognized and acted upon," said Eric J. Hall, president of the Alzheimer's Foundation of America.

More information: Alzheimer's plan:
[http://aspe.hhs.gov/daltcp/napa/\(hash\)DraftNatlPlan](http://aspe.hhs.gov/daltcp/napa/(hash)DraftNatlPlan)

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