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State Report: Opioid deaths high, but data signals progress in Alaska's fight against opioids

ANCHORAGE – The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services Section of Epidemiology released a report today on the "Health Impacts of Opioid Misuse in Alaska." The report provides a broad overview of Alaska's opioid epidemic and related trend data to help Alaskans better understand the scope of this serious public health crisis.

"It's important to summarize the trends and challenges of this epidemic so we can respond as effectively as possible," said Dr. Jay Butler, Alaska's Chief Medical Officer and Division of Public Health Director. "While deaths caused by prescription opioids and heroin declined in 2017, we have seen more deaths caused by fentanyl, a more deadly synthetic opioid."

Overall, opioid-related deaths in Alaska have risen in recent years, similar to national trends. Between 2010 and 2017, 623 opioid overdose deaths were reported in Alaska, a 77 percent increase. Use of synthetic opioids like fentanyl increased dramatically in Alaska last year. Nationwide, efforts to control this epidemic are complicated by the increased use of synthetic opioids.

In Alaska, the opioid epidemic has disproportionately impacted males, white and Alaska Native people, and persons aged 25-44 years.

Economic impacts are also significant. Between 2016 and 2017, hospital visits in Alaska due to opioid overdoses cost more than \$23 million.

While Alaska's opioid epidemic continues, there are some encouraging findings in the report:

- Use of prescription opioids declined among Medicare patients in recent years, suggesting Alaska doctors may be prescribing opioids with more caution;
- Naloxone, a medication that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose, is readily available statewide and is being used to save lives; and
- Self-reported heroin use among traditional high school students dropped in 2013 and has not increased since then.

Controlling this epidemic requires many long-term strategies. The DHSS Office of Substance Misuse and Addiction Prevention is working with communities across Alaska to limit the dosage of first-time opioid prescriptions, better understand opioid misuse as a chronic disease, improve access to treatment and recovery services, and more.

[Read the full report here.](#) For more information: opioids.alaska.com.

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