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State Report Highlights Negative Health Impacts of Alcohol Misuse in Alaska

ANCHORAGE – The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services Section of Epidemiology released a report today detailing the negative impacts of alcohol misuse throughout Alaska.

Alaskans experience higher rates of alcohol-related deaths and binge drinking compared to most other states, and the rate of alcohol-related deaths has increased by 25 percent since 1999.

“While the recent increase in opioid and methamphetamine use has garnered much-needed public attention, alcohol misuse continues to be a long-standing health challenge,” said Dr. Jay Butler, Alaska’s Chief Medical Officer and Division of Public Health Director. “This report is a reminder that alcohol misuse is an important driver of ill-health and death in Alaska and it needs greater attention.”

The report tallies the wide-ranging impacts of alcohol misuse and discusses the work being done across the state to address the problem.

Long-term excessive drinking can lead to widespread health problems, including birth defects, brain damage, cancer, heart disease, liver damage, and skin disorders, among other conditions.

In 2015, Alaska ranked third highest among states for alcohol-related deaths. Alcohol-related death rates continue to rise in Alaska; from 15.7 deaths per 100,000 people in 1999 to 20 deaths per 100,000 people in 2015.

Alcohol misuse reaches beyond individuals and can result in trauma that lasts for generations. In 2016, nearly half of all Alaska children in foster care or living in out-of-home placements came from a home with alcohol abuse by a parent or guardian.

Alcohol-misuse also places a strain on Alaska’s economy. In 2015, alcohol use disorder cost the state about \$1.84 billion in lost productivity, incarceration for criminal offenses, and medical treatment or hospitalization.

One bright spot highlighted in the report is a significant decline in youth consumption of alcohol. Alaska high school students (grades 9-12) who reported ever drinking alcohol declined from 80 percent in 1995 to 54 percent in 2015. Binge drinking is also down among youth, from 31 percent among traditional high school students in 1995 to 13 percent in 2015. Alaska’s youth rates are also lower than the U.S. averages.

“The teen years are a time of increased susceptibility for developing problem drinking. These data indicate a change in youth behavior that we hope will continue into adulthood,” said Dr. Butler. “Prevention among teens is critical, as are early intervention efforts that help people avoid misusing alcohol before they cannot stop.”

A number of programs in Alaska connect alcohol misuse prevention with the importance of health and wellness. These programs work with young Alaskans and first-time DUI and Minor Consumption offenders to help them reduce their risk of alcohol- and drug-related problems.

Among the report’s other findings:

- Binge drinking rates among adults are higher in Alaska than the U.S. average (19 percent and 16 percent respectively).
- In 2016, 39 percent of patients who went to a health facility for alcohol-related issues were repeat patients. Those repeat patients accounted for 75 percent of all alcohol-related health facility visits.
- From 2006-2016, 18 percent of all criminal convictions in Alaska listed alcohol as a contributing factor.
- In 2017, 7.6 percent of all emergency medical service (EMS) transports in Alaska resulted from alcohol misuse while 1.6 percent of all EMS transports resulted from opioid misuse.
- From 2010-2016, there were 962 alcohol-related deaths in Alaska – this is 198 more deaths than meth- and opioid-related deaths combined.

[Read the full report here.](http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/InfoCenter/Pages/topics/alcohol_drugs.aspx) For more information:
http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/InfoCenter/Pages/topics/alcohol_drugs.aspx.

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