

# Alaska Chronic Disease Facts: 2023 Brief Report



**Chronic diseases**—those that go on for a long time and often don't go away completely—are among the most common and costly health problems. We often know how to prevent them. Examples of diseases people live with for long periods, possibly a lifetime, are obesity, heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, dementia, asthma, and arthritis.

## Chronic Disease Illness and Death

- Cancer is the leading cause of death in Alaska.<sup>1</sup>
  - The most common causes of **cancer death** in Alaska in 2021 were (1) lung, (2) colorectal, (3) breast and (4) prostate.<sup>1</sup>
  - The most commonly **diagnosed cancers** in Alaska in 2019 were (1) breast, (2) prostate, (3) lung, and (4) colorectal. These 4 cancers represented 48% of all cancer cases in Alaska.<sup>2</sup>
- COVID-19 was the 3rd leading cause of death in Alaska in 2021.<sup>1</sup> There were an estimated 1,421 “excess deaths” in Alaska in 2021, or more deaths than expected based on historical trends. This reflects both the direct impact of COVID-19 and indirect effects from the disease’s impact on other forms of disease and injury.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2021, heart disease represented 16% of deaths, and stroke represented 4% in Alaska.<sup>1</sup>
- Having type 2 diabetes decreases life expectancy by up to 8 years.<sup>4</sup> Nationwide, \$1 of every \$4 spent on health care goes toward caring for people with diabetes.<sup>5</sup>

## Healthy Habits

Four healthy lifestyle factors—never smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, being physically active, and following a healthy diet—are linked to as much as an 80% reduction in the chances of developing the most common and deadly chronic diseases.<sup>7</sup>

### Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity

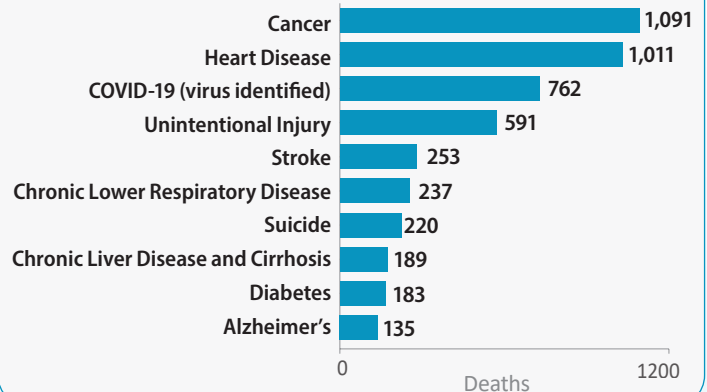
For nearly three decades, the percentage of adult Alaskans with obesity has continued to rise.<sup>6</sup> Physical inactivity and unhealthy eating contribute to overweight, obesity and a number of chronic diseases, including many cancers, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes.<sup>8,9</sup> Obesity also impacts national security. It is one of the leading medical reasons that young adults are disqualified from joining the military and has been an issue for military recruitment for decades.<sup>10</sup>

### Tobacco

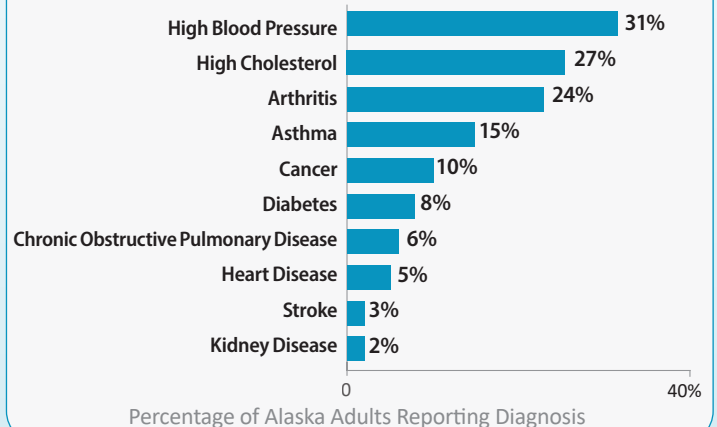
Tobacco use is the leading preventable cause of disease and death in the United States, and smoking has been linked to

Many of the top causes of death in Alaska are due to chronic conditions.

10 Most Common Causes of Death in Alaska (2021)<sup>1</sup>

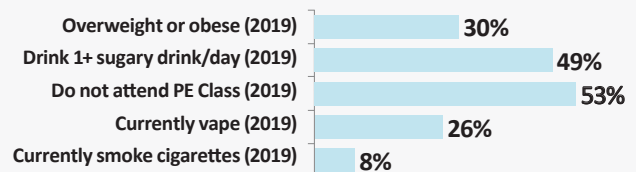


Many Alaska adults are living with chronic conditions. (2021)<sup>6</sup>  
(See reference for condition definitions)

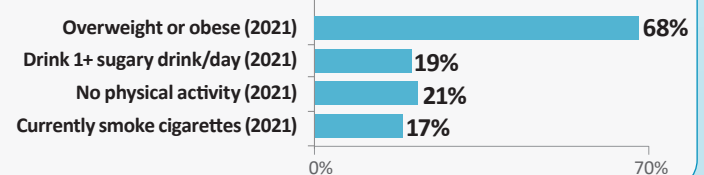


Many Alaska adults and teens have factors that increase their chance of developing chronic diseases.<sup>6</sup>

#### HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS<sup>14</sup>



#### ADULTS<sup>6</sup>



causing diseases in nearly all organs of the body.<sup>11</sup> Alaska’s economy loses an estimated \$400 million per year because smoking-related illnesses impacts people’s ability to do their usual activities, including work.<sup>12</sup> In 2016, health care costs exceeded \$192 million for Alaska adults covered by Medicaid who had a diagnosis linked to tobacco use.<sup>13</sup>

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## Preventive Health Services

Access to health care impacts everything from prevention of disease and disability, to quality of life, to life expectancy. Limited access can reduce the possibility of receiving preventive health care, including routine disease screening and immunizations. Alaskans' access to health care depends on many things, including whether they have a regular health care provider with whom they can communicate and trust, whether they have transportation to get to their provider, and whether they have health insurance. Even those who do have insurance may face limitations in the services they can access, due to gaps in coverage or rates of reimbursement.<sup>15</sup>

### Early Detection

Prediabetes is a health condition involving blood sugar levels that are higher than normal, but not high enough to be diagnosed as diabetes. Many people have prediabetes and don't know it. Answers to [a few questions](#) can aid diagnosis. Once diagnosed, prediabetes can be reversed with changes to physical activity and nutrition before it

### Health begins where we live, learn, work and play—long before we need medical care.

Our life experiences impact our health in many ways.<sup>22</sup> These experiences can affect people's ability to access health care and preventive services; take steps to be healthier; and live long, full lives. For example, we know that Alaska adults without high school education and those whose incomes are below the federal poverty level are more likely to hold beliefs about health that may make it harder for them to take steps to prevent chronic disease, such as being active or having their blood pressure checked.<sup>23</sup> To improve the health of Alaskans, we must address poverty, education, and other upstream factors that impact the opportunity to be healthy.<sup>24</sup>

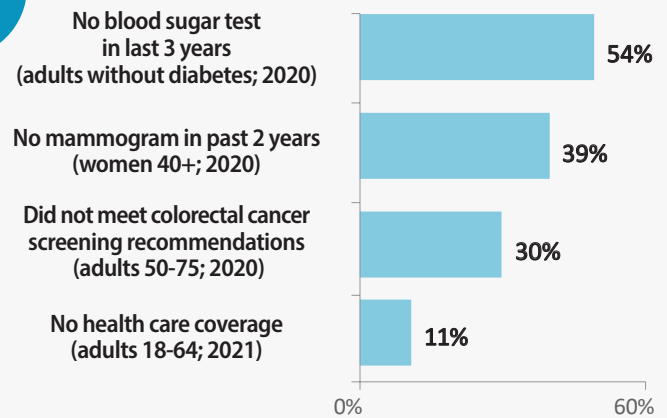
## Chronic Disease & COVID-19 Risk

Nearly 3 out of 4 Alaska adults have underlying health concerns that increase their chances of serious illness or death from COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> About 72% of Alaska adults have at least one of the following ongoing health concerns that have been shown to increase chances for serious illness or death, should they contract COVID-19:

- Smoke now or formerly
- Have a depression disorder
- Have heart disease or have had a heart attack
- Have obesity
- Have type 1 or type 2 diabetes
- Have had a stroke
- Are inactive
- Have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Have chronic kidney disease

This estimate is likely an undercount, given that strong evidence links other known health concerns with severe illness from COVID-19.

### Many Alaska adults get less than the recommended preventive services.<sup>6</sup>

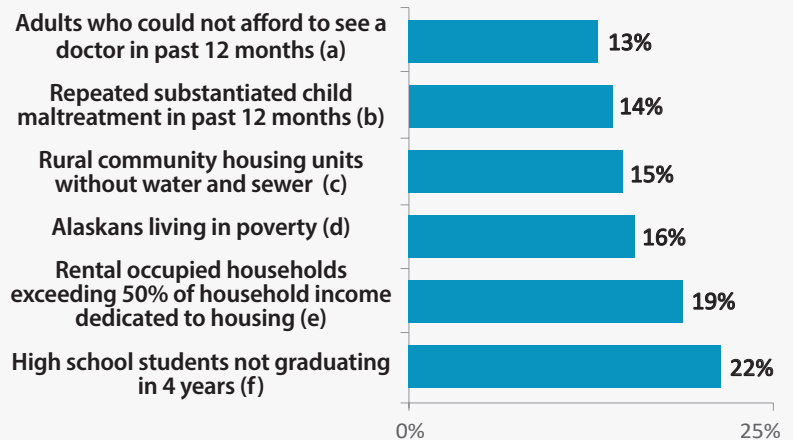


becomes type 2 diabetes.<sup>16</sup> Screening for lung, breast, colorectal, and cervical cancer has been shown to either lower chances of dying from that cancer or prevent that cancer altogether.<sup>17-20</sup>

### No Health Care Coverage

Uninsured adults have less access to recommended care, receive poorer quality of care, and experience worse health outcomes than insured adults do.<sup>21</sup>

### Many Alaskans have life experiences that may impact their opportunity to be healthy.<sup>25</sup> (See reference for data sources for a-f)



## What can we do to prevent or control chronic disease?

### Community partners and public health professionals



- Make the healthy choice the easier choice. Choose solutions and actions that improve the health of all Alaskans, specifically groups who face increased chances of getting sick or dying from a chronic disease. For example:
  - Provide tobacco-free workplaces.
  - Partner with K-12 schools on tobacco-free policies, including alternatives to suspension programs for youth.
  - Increase access to affordable, smokefree housing.
  - Design, build and improve the connections between everyday destinations such as schools, parks, and worksites to support physical activity.
  - Ensure all foods and beverages for sale at schools and worksites are nutritious and promote health.
  - Offer all students quality health and physical education in schools.
  - Support physical activity and good nutrition in child care centers and preschools.
  - Offer proven wellness and prevention programs at businesses and community sites, and include them in employee insurance packages.

### Individuals



- Take an active role in your health and your family's health by being physically active, eating a healthy diet, avoiding tobacco use, and cutting out sugary drinks.
- Ask your health care provider about recommended screenings and services.
- Consider signing up for Alaska's [Fresh Start](#) program. Fresh Start helps connect Alaska adults to free programs that can help them make a fresh start any time in their life – no matter if it's losing weight, adding physical activity, lowering blood sugar, lowering blood pressure, or quitting smoking or vaping.



### Free Programs for Better Health

- Log onto [Live Vape Free](#) for personalized support tips and resources to start conversations with your teens about vaping.

### Health care providers



- Ask and advise patients of all ages about physical activity, maintaining healthy weight, avoiding sugary drink consumption and addressing tobacco use.
- Screen for chronic conditions and their risk factors.
- Refer patients to appropriate preventive and treatment services, including Alaska's [Fresh Start](#) program.



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