

# Alaska Chronic Disease Facts: 2021 Brief Report

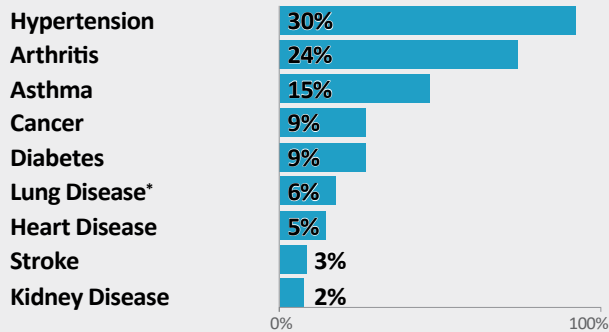


**Chronic diseases**—those that go on for a long time and often don't go away completely—are among the most common and costly health problems, and we often know how to prevent them. Examples of diseases people live with for long periods, possibly a lifetime, are obesity, heart disease, stroke, cancer,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

## Chronic Disease Illness and Death

While deaths due to COVID-19 will figure prominently in the leading causes of death in 2020, **cancer was the leading cause of death in Alaska in 2019.**<sup>1</sup>

### Percent of Alaska Adults with Select Chronic Conditions (2018)<sup>5\*\*</sup>



\* Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease \*\* See reference for condition definitions

## 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 risk of developing the most common and deadly chronic diseases.<sup>6</sup>

### Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity

For nearly three decades, the percentage of adult Alaskans with obesity has continued to rise.<sup>5</sup> Physical inactivity and unhealthy eating contribute to overweight, obesity, and a number of chronic diseases, including some cancers, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes.<sup>7,8</sup> In addition to health consequences, overweight and obesity among high school students and young adults impacts national security. Weight-related conditions are the most common reason applicants for military service are disqualified.<sup>9</sup>

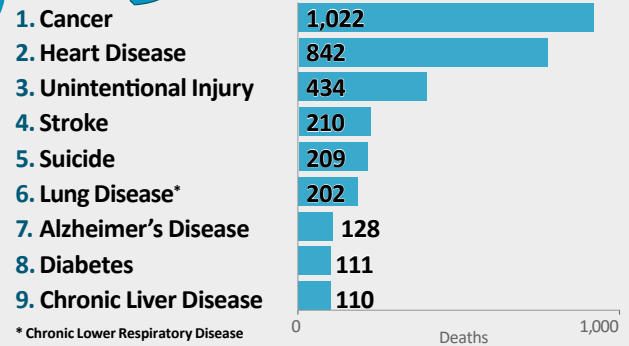
### Tobacco

Tobacco use is the leading preventable cause of disease and death in the United States, and smoking has been causally linked to diseases in nearly all organs of the body.<sup>10</sup> In Alaska, smoking results in an estimated 700 deaths each year.<sup>11</sup> In 2016, adult Alaska Medicaid beneficiaries who use tobacco cost the state more than \$192 million in healthcare expenditures.<sup>12</sup>

## Preventive Health Services

Access to health care impacts everything from prevention of disease and disability, to quality and length of life. 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.

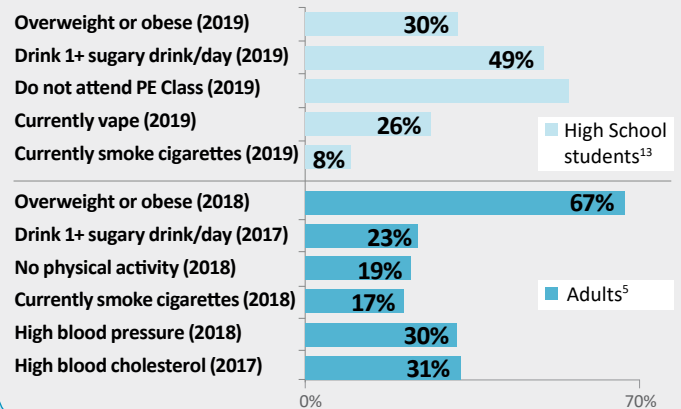
## 9 Most Common Causes of Death in Alaska in 2019<sup>1</sup>



\* Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease

- The most common causes of **cancer death** in Alaska in 2019 were (1) lung, (2) colorectal, (3) pancreas, and (4) breast.<sup>1</sup>
- The most commonly **diagnosed cancers** in Alaska in 2018 were (1) breast, (2) prostate, (3) lung, and (4) colorectal. These four cancers accounted for 50% of all cancer cases in Alaska.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2019, heart disease accounted for 18% of deaths, and stroke accounted for 5% in Alaska.<sup>1</sup>
- Having type 2 diabetes decreases life expectancy by up to 8 years.<sup>3</sup> In the US, \$1 of every \$4 spent on healthcare is spent on caring for people with diabetes.<sup>4</sup>

### Percent of Alaskans with Factors that Increase the Chance of Developing Chronic Diseases



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Access also depends on having transportation to get to appointments and having health insurance. Even those with insurance may face limitations in covered services or lower rates of reimbursement.<sup>14</sup>

## Early Detection

Uncontrolled blood sugar increases the risks for heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, blindness and amputation.<sup>15</sup> Screening for lung, breast, colorectal, and cervical cancer has been shown to either lower your chances of dying from that cancer or prevent that cancer altogether.<sup>16-19</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>20</sup>

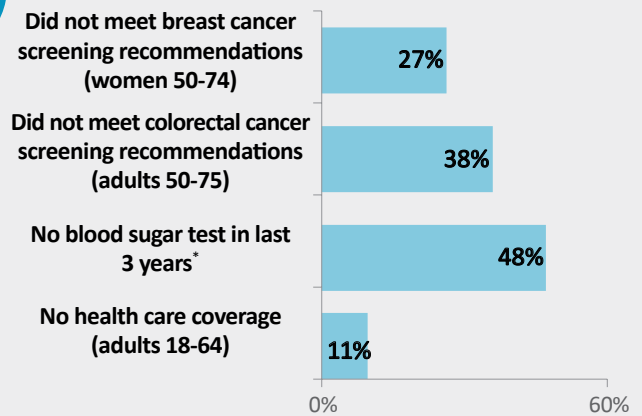
## Health begins where we live, learn, work and play—long before we need medical care.

Health starts—long before illness—in Alaskans' homes, schools, and workplaces. Public health professionals must focus on upstream factors that contribute to unhealthy behaviors and illness, such as poverty<sup>21</sup> and adverse childhood experiences,<sup>22</sup> to ensure all Alaskans have a chance to live a healthy life.

## Some groups of Alaskans are more likely to get sick or die from a chronic disease.

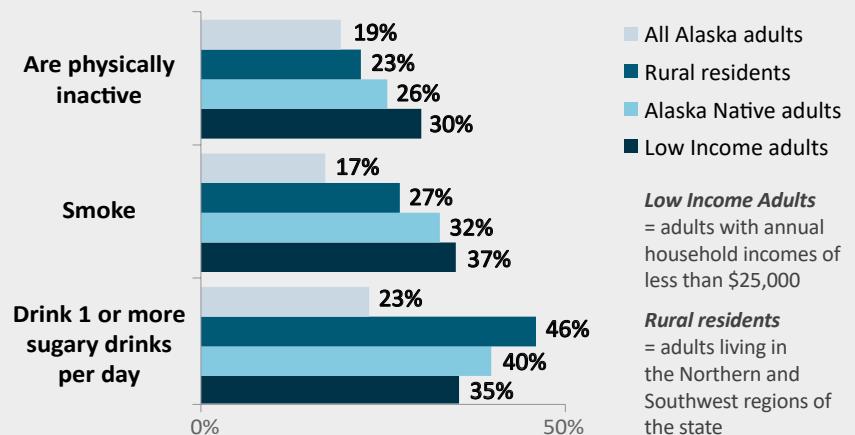
- In 2019, Alaska Native people were 1.4 times to 4 times more likely than their white peers to die from cancer, chronic lower respiratory disease, stroke, heart disease or chronic liver disease or cirrhosis.<sup>1</sup>
- In 2015-2019, Alaskans living in the North Slope borough, the Lake and Peninsula borough, the Yukon-Koyukuk census area, the municipality of Skagway, and the Nome census area had the highest death rates from cancer compared to other parts of Alaska.<sup>23</sup>

Percent of Alaska Adults Not Receiving Preventive Services, Alaska (2018)<sup>5</sup>



\* 2018 data except where noted with \* for 2017 data.

Percent of Alaska Adults with Factors that Increase the Chance of Developing Chronic Diseases, Select Populations (2018)<sup>5</sup>



## Chronic Disease and COVID-19 Risk

Two out of three Alaska adults have underlying health concerns that increase their chances of serious illness or death from COVID-19.<sup>24</sup> About 68% 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:

- 46% of Alaska adults are current or former smokers
- 32% have obesity
- 8% have type 1 or type 2 diabetes
- 6% have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- 5% have heart disease or have had a heart attack
- 2% 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. In 2020, COVID-19 is estimated to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death in the US, and many of these individuals will have had an underlying chronic disease.<sup>25</sup>

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



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### Community partners and public health professionals



- Make the healthy choice the easier choice. Choose solutions and actions that improve the health of all Alaskans and in particular groups who face increased chances of getting sick or dying from a chronic disease. For example:
  - Provide smokefree workplaces.
  - Enhance 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 early childhood education and programming.

### 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.
- If you use tobacco, call [Alaska's Tobacco Quit Line](https://www.dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Documents/Tobacco/PDF/2019_AKTobaccoFacts.pdf) to get free, confidential help quitting: (1-800-QUIT-NOW / 1-800-784-8669).
- If you have diabetes or prediabetes, join a program to help you [prevent or manage diabetes](#).

### Health care providers



- Ask and advise patients about physical activity, sugary drink consumption, and tobacco use.
- Screen for chronic conditions and their risk factors.
- Refer patients to appropriate preventive and treatment services.

### Resources



- For additional resources to improve chronic disease prevention and management, visit the Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion at [www.dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic](http://www.dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic).

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