

Alaska Chronic Disease Facts: 2024 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, representing 19% of deaths overall.¹
 - The most common causes of **cancer death** in Alaska in 2022 were (1) lung, (2) colorectal, (3) pancreas and (4) prostate.¹
 - The most commonly **diagnosed cancers** in Alaska in 2020 were (1) breast, (2) lung, (3) prostate, and (4) colorectal. These 4 cancers represented 48% of all cancer cases in Alaska.²
- In 2022, heart disease represented 17% of deaths, and stroke represented 4% in Alaska.¹
- Having type 2 diabetes decreases life expectancy by up to 8 years.³ Nationwide, \$1 of every \$4 spent on health care goes toward caring for people with diabetes.⁴
- In 2020 an estimated 9% of Alaskans over 65 had Alzheimer's Disease or Related Dementias.⁵

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.⁷

Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity

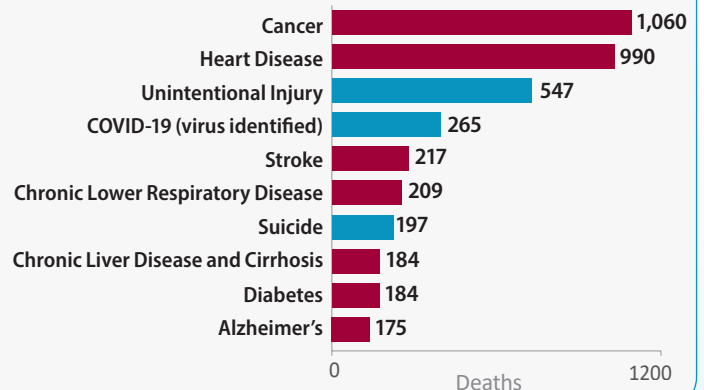
For over two decades, the percentage of adult and high school aged Alaskans with obesity has continued to rise.^{8,9} Physical activity and healthy eating can prevent overweight, obesity and several chronic diseases, including many cancers, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes.^{10,11} It can also impact mental health. Healthy eating patterns have been associated with a reduced risk of depression.¹² The mental health benefits of physical activity—for adults and children—include better mood, sleep and focus.¹⁰

Tobacco

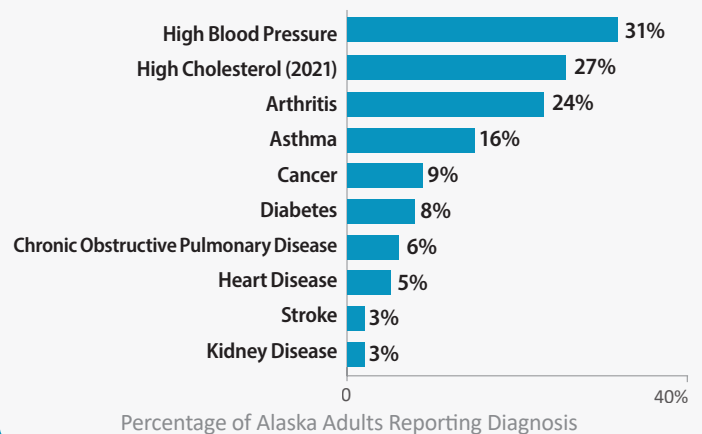
Tobacco use is the leading preventable cause of disease and death in the United States, and smoking has been linked to causing diseases in nearly all organs of the body.¹³ Alaska's economy loses an estimated \$400 million per year because smoking-related illnesses impacts people's ability to do their usual activities, including work.¹⁴ In 2016, health care costs exceeded \$192 million for Alaska adults covered by Medicaid who had a diagnosis linked to tobacco use.¹⁵

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

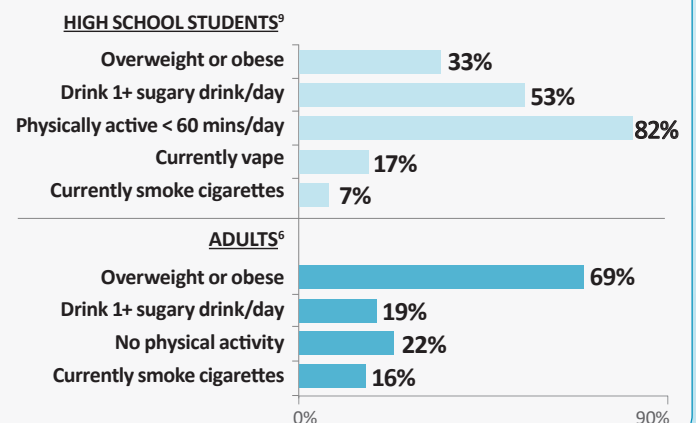
10 Most Common Causes of Death in Alaska (2022)¹



Many Alaska adults are living with chronic conditions. (2022)⁶
(See reference for condition definitions)



Many Alaska adults and teens have factors that increase their chance of developing chronic diseases.



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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.¹⁶

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 becomes type 2 diabetes.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸⁻²¹ Changes to memory can be scary, but working with your provider to detect brain health declines EARLY is important. Early diagnosis with memory changes can help individuals understand the changes to their brain and allow them to make early decisions about their future and better access care, medications and resources.²² Finally, identifying high blood pressure and making changes to health and medication is an important step to preventing complications, including risk of stroke, heart disease and kidney disease.²³ As the chart above shows, many more Alaskans could be taking advantage of such screenings.

No Health Care Coverage

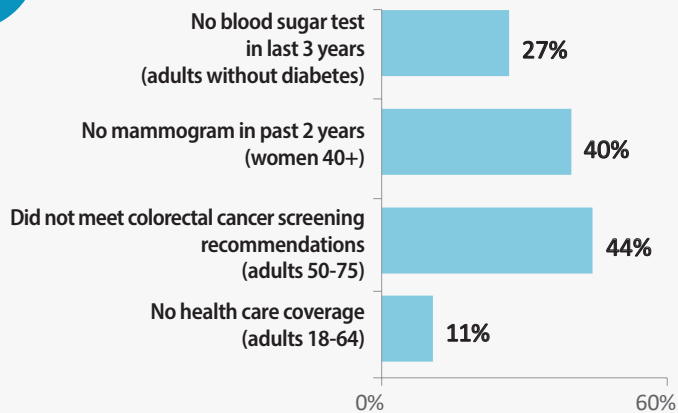
Uninsured adults have less access to recommended care, receive poorer quality of care, and experience worse health outcomes than insured adults do.²⁴ Expiration of the expanded Medicaid access under the public health emergency has increased the number of Alaskans falling in the gap between being eligible for Medicaid and being able to afford insurance.

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

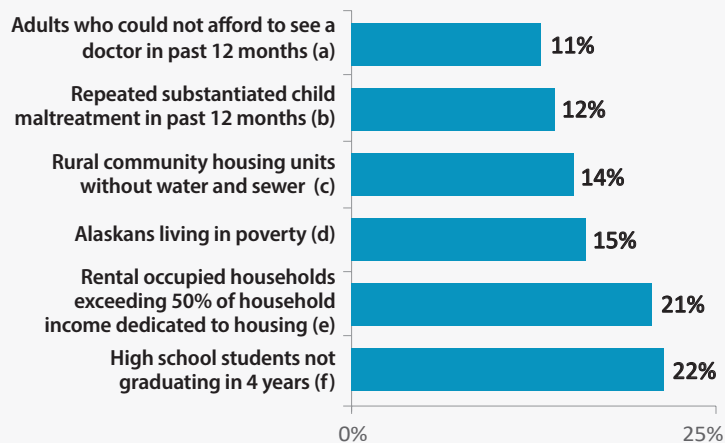
Our life experiences impact our health in many ways.²⁵ These experiences can affect people's ability to access health care and preventive services, and live long, full lives. For example, we know that Alaska adults who have not had the opportunity to obtain a high school diploma or have an income above the federal poverty level have less confidence in their ability to take preventive actions and are also less likely to do so.²⁶

To improve the health of all Alaskans, we must take action to address poverty, education, and other societal factors that impact the ability to achieve health.²⁷

Many Alaska adults get less than the recommended preventive services.⁶



Many Alaskans have life experiences that may impact their opportunity to be healthy.²⁸ (See reference for data sources for a-f)



RESOURCES

- For resources to improve chronic disease prevention and management, visit the Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion at <https://health.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Pages/default.aspx>. See more resources on page 3.

What can we do to prevent or manage chronic disease?

Community partners and public health professionals

- Make the healthy choice the easier choice. Choose 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 and schools, with alternatives to suspension programs for students.
 - Support policies that increase the price and legal age to purchase tobacco products.
 - Increase access to affordable, smokefree housing.
 - Build walkable and rollable communities to support physical activity, e.g., improve bike lanes, sidewalks, trails, and lighting. Ensure nutritious foods and beverages are available at schools and worksites.
 - Offer all students quality health and physical education in schools.
 - Support physical activity and good nutrition in childcare centers and preschools.
 - Offer proven prevention programs at worksites, and educate policy makers and employers about chronic diseases' costs and the value of reimbursement for preventive and screening services.



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Individuals

- Actively support your health and your family's health by being physically active, eating a healthy diet, and cutting out sugary drinks (see [Play Every Day](#) for tips); and avoiding tobacco use. See a health care provider every year and ask about recommended screenings and services.



- Consider signing up for Alaska's [Fresh Start](#) programs. 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.



- If you smoke, vape, or use any tobacco or nicotine, consider quitting. There are many resources available, some may be in your community, or online at [Alaska's Tobacco Quit Line](#).
- 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.

