

Tobacco in the Great Land



A Portrait of Alaska's
Leading Cause of Death



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Executive Summary

Tobacco use is Alaska's number-one public health problem. In terms of deaths, chronic illness and disability, no other underlying cause comes close. Tobacco cuts short the lives of more Alaskans than all infectious diseases combined. It leads to more deaths than all environmental toxins combined, more deaths than all other drug and alcohol use, and more deaths than all injuries – intentional or non-intentional – combined. The single best thing that Alaskans who use tobacco can do to improve their health is to quit smoking or chewing tobacco products. The single best thing that young people can do to improve their odds for a long and healthy life is never to use tobacco.

Control of the deadly tobacco epidemic in Alaska involves a partnership between state and local governments, voluntary associations, clinicians, and enlightened citizens who are mobilizing for change at the community level. The success of this partnership depends on access to complete and accurate information on the use of tobacco throughout our state. Many surveys have recently been conducted in Alaska to understand better who is using tobacco products, who is exposed involuntarily to tobacco smoke, and who is ready to accept and act on anti-tobacco public health messages. These surveys, which have added significantly to our understanding of tobacco use in Alaska, include:

- The Adult Tobacco Survey of approximately 2,500 randomly selected Alaskans aged 18 and older (2003)
- The Youth Risk Behavior Survey of approximately 1,500 randomly selected Alaskan high school students (1995 & 2003)
- The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, an annual survey of approximately 2,500 randomly selected Alaskan adults (1991-2002)
- The Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System, an annual survey of approximately 1,900 randomly selected Alaskan women who recently gave birth (1991-2000)
- The Health Care Provider Survey of 384 Alaskan clinicians, who shared how they approach patients on reducing tobacco use (2003)

In addition, ongoing data are available from the Alaska Department of Revenue on tobacco consumption in the state. There have also been privately funded surveys of tobacco media awareness in various Alaskan media markets by Hellenthal and Associates (2001-2003). Finally, data on the impact of tobacco on mortality, and the economic costs of fatal tobacco-related diseases, can be estimated for Alaska using a data system known as Smoking-Attributable Morbidity, Mortality and Economic Costs (SAMMEC).

Gathering useful data from each of these sources could be cumbersome for any Alaskans seeking a comprehensive overview of the tobacco problem in this state. This monograph is meant to



simplify that task, by collecting all that is known about tobacco use in Alaska into one easy-to-use resource. Data from the various streams have been pooled and arranged into three large groupings: adult data, youth data and environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) data. Results are presented graphically, along with insightful interpretations that put the numbers into perspective and take into account possible sources of bias and confounding factors.

The picture that emerges from this wide-ranging undertaking is of a state whose social and economic health is under severe threat from tobacco use. The toll of tobacco use in Alaska – past, present and future – is staggering. Unless smoking is vastly reduced, tens of thousands of Alaskans will die prematurely in the next 50 years because of tobacco. But tobacco's burden is not being borne evenly throughout the state's population. Alaska Natives, rural Alaskans and economically disadvantaged Alaskans stand to suffer more from tobacco use and its consequences than their non-native, urban and more advantaged counterparts. Even non-smokers are at risk of tobacco-related diseases, as shown by the widespread exposure to secondhand smoke reported by Alaskan adults and youth alike. A sharp cut in smoking by high school youth since 1995 provides the most hopeful sign that Alaska's grim present reality may one day be followed by a smoke-free future.

Important findings emerging from this monograph are numerous, and cannot all be listed here. This monograph highlights the health and economic burden of tobacco use in Alaska, including the following:

- Tobacco is the single largest killer of Alaskans, claiming nearly 500 lives per year directly, and an additional 120 lives through secondhand smoke.
- Tobacco-related deaths in Alaska exceed the combined total from motor vehicle crashes, suicides, homicides and air transport accidents.
- The impact of tobacco on mortality in Alaska is more than double that of alcohol.
- The annual economic cost of tobacco-related mortality exceeds \$260 million in Alaska. This is more than 50 times the amount the state spends on tobacco control and prevention activities.

Other key findings from this monograph are arranged here in the same groupings that comprise the main chapters: youth, adult and secondhand smoke. For high school youth, the essential findings in this monograph include the following:

- Smoking among high school youth in Alaska has been cut in half since 1995, with only 19 percent reporting that they have smoked at least one cigarette in the past month.
- Frequent smoking, in which students report using cigarettes on at least 20 days in the previous month, has fallen in Alaska from 21 percent in 1995 to just 8 percent.
- Nearly half of high school students in Alaska have never taken a single puff of a cigarette. Only 28 percent of students reported that in 1995.
- Alaska Native youth are three to four times as likely to smoke as non-native youth.



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- Approximately 11 percent of Alaskan high school youth report using smokeless tobacco in the past month. Smokeless tobacco use is particularly high among Alaska Native youth, with rates of 32 percent among males and 18 percent among females.
- Alaskan students who report that their parents never talk to them about school are almost twice as likely to smoke as students whose parents do talk with them about school.
- Alaskan students who get mostly C's or worse in school are four times as likely to smoke as those who get mostly A's.
- Alaskan students who do not participate in after-school activities are almost twice as likely to smoke as students who participate in one or more such activities per week.
- Alaskan students older than 16 years of age who smoke are twice as likely to have used alcohol in the past month, and are four times as likely to have used marijuana during that time, compared to those who do not smoke.
- Alaskan students older than 16 years of age who smoke are three times as likely to have ever used inhalants, and four times as likely to have ever tried cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine or ecstasy, compared to those who do not smoke.
- Alaskan students older than 16 years of age who smoke are almost twice as likely to have had sex in the previous three months, compared to those who do not smoke.
- Alaskan students who smoke are twice as likely to have been in a physical fight in the past year, and four times as likely to have been driving while intoxicated during the past 30 days, compared to those who do not smoke.

For adults, the essential findings in this monograph include the following:

- Per capita cigarette consumption has dropped by 30 percent since introduction of a state wide excise tax in 1997.
- One in four Alaskan adults currently smokes cigarettes
- Among adults, Alaska Native smoking prevalence is nearly double that of Non-Natives.
- The average number of cigarettes that Alaskan adults are smoking appears to be decreasing.
- Smoking is markedly increased in Alaskan adults with low incomes and less educational attainment. It is also more common in younger adults, in the unemployed and in those living in rural parts of the state.
- Alaskan adults who smoke are more likely than nonsmokers to be physically inactive and to engage in binge drinking.



- More than 80 percent of Alaskan adults who smoke want to quit, with approximately half reporting that they have quit temporarily for at least one day in the past year.
- Smokers who have quit smoking permanently now outnumber smoking adults in Alaska.
- 86% of adult smokers in Alaska who have seen a health care provider in the last year were advised to quit smoking.
- Approximately 4 percent of Alaskan adults use smokeless tobacco, 7 percent of males and 1 percent of females. Among Alaska Natives the prevalence is 21 percent among males and 5 percent among females.
- Approximately 17 percent of new mothers in Alaska report that they smoked cigarettes during the last three months of pregnancy.

Regarding exposures and beliefs about environmental tobacco smoke, the essential findings in this monograph include the following:

- Approximately 1 in 6 Alaskan adults who do not smoke live with one or more smokers.
- Approximately 7 percent of Alaskan adults who hold jobs and do not smoke are exposed to secondhand smoke at work.
- Nearly three-quarters of Alaskan adults believe that smoking should not be allowed at all in restaurants. This includes nearly half of smokers.
- Nearly one-third of Alaskan adults say they would eat in restaurants more often if smoking were not permitted there. Only 8 percent say they would eat out less often.
- Nearly 90 percent of Alaskan adults believe that people should be protected from other people's cigarette smoke. This includes three-quarters of smokers.
- Nearly 50 percent of Alaskan high school youth who do not smoke say they have been exposed in the past week to secondhand smoke inside of buildings or cars.
- More than 95 percent of Alaskan high school youth say they believe that secondhand smoke is harmful. This view was even expressed by 89 percent of those youth who smoke.

These important results, and many others, await the reader in the pages that follow. Taken all together, the charts and tables in this monograph document the scope of the tobacco problem in Alaska, establish baselines for measuring future progress and identify areas to target new public health approaches.

Funding for tobacco prevention and control programs in Alaska falls short of the \$8.1 million recommended by the CDC as the minimum amount necessary to implement a comprehensive tobacco prevention and control program. The maximum amount of tobacco prevention and control funding in Alaska to date totals \$6.1 million, an amount that does not even begin to



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approach the CDC recommended maximum of \$16.5 million.

Despite funding limitations, Alaska has established the foundation for a comprehensive tobacco prevention and control program. Current tobacco prevention and control efforts thrive on a strong partnership between state government and the Alaska Tobacco Control Alliance, whose members include the Alaska Native Health Board, the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, and the American Lung Association of Alaska. Components of the state tobacco program include an aggressive anti-tobacco media campaign aimed especially at preventing the uptake of tobacco by youth and promoting cessation among adults who smoke. The state also supports community-based advocacy programs that discourage the initiation of tobacco use by youth and advance the enactment of local ordinances that reduce environmental tobacco smoke exposure.

This monograph is dedicated to all those have joined the struggle against tobacco-related disease because they care deeply about the health of Alaska's people. We hope this monograph will become a trusted sword in their daily battles against the scourge of tobacco use in this great state.

