

Dramatic decline in teen smoking largely offset by boom in e-cigarette use, state report says

By Yereth Rosen, Alaska Beacon - December 22, 2022



Electronic cigarettes are promoted on Dec. 21 in the windows of a specialty store in Midtown Anchorage. A new state report shows that teen use of e-cigarettes, also called vapes, has risen dramatically, as is the trend nationally. (Yereth Rosen/ Alaska Beacon)

Alaska teens have largely ditched cigarettes over the past two decades, but they have substituted that unhealthy habit with another: vaping.

About a quarter of surveyed high schoolers reported using electronic cigarettes in the past 30 days, according to the [Alaska Tobacco Facts Update](#), released last week by the Alaska Department of Health. The national rate of teen e-cigarette use, also known as vaping, is even higher, at 33%, the report said.

Among Alaska youth, cigarette smoking has declined drastically since the 1990s, from 37% in 1995 to 16% in 2009 to 8% in 2019, the report said. But because of the 26% of respondents who use e-cigarettes, along with a substantial percentage of teens who use smokeless tobacco, overall use of tobacco or nicotine products among Alaska youth was 35%, the report said.

Alaska teens' use of e-cigarettes has increased significantly in just a few years, from 18% in 2015, [state data](#) shows.

Manufacturers of e-cigarettes have been widely **criticized for their marketing strategies** that have proved **appealing to teens**, including use of flavoring, bright packaging and **sophisticated advertisement campaigns**. Like their peers elsewhere, Alaska teens are influenced by those strategies, said Christy Knight, manager of the Alaska Division of Public Health's Tobacco Prevention and Control Program.

"We find that youth are vulnerable to e-cigarette marketing," she said.

Additionally, sleek and sometimes-deceptive packaging helps teens to use e-cigarettes discreetly, without parents' or school officials' knowledge, Knight said.

State tobacco tax excludes e-cigarettes

In Alaska, there is another factor in the growing youth use of vaping devices: the lack of a state tax on the products. The last time the state raised tobacco taxes was 2006, before e-cigarettes were prominent on the market, Knight said.

The Alaska legislature tried to address the issue by passing a bill earlier this year that would have imposed the first-ever state tax on e-cigarette products. That tax amounted to 35% of wholesale value.

The bill would have also raised the legal age of purchase to 21 to match federal law; currently, Alaska law sets the minimum age at 19. The Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development **maintains that federal law applies** and is to be followed in the state, but the mismatch in age requirements could cause confusion and cause the state to lose out on some federal grant funding, proponents of the bill said.

Gov. Mike Dunleavy **vetoed the bill** because of its tax.

"There were many conversations about what an appropriate level to tax would be, but ultimately a tax increase on the people of Alaska is not something I can support," the governor said in his **veto message** to Senate President Peter Micciche.



Incoming state Senate President Gary Stevens, a Republican from Kodiak, hopes to pass another bill that would impose state taxes on e-cigarettes and raise the state's legal age to purchase and legally possess tobacco products to 21 after a similar bill was vetoed earlier this year by Gov. Mike Dunleavy. (Yereth Rosen/Alaska Beacon)

The bill originally proposed taxing e-cigarette products at 75% of wholesale value, the same rate that is applied to tobacco products other than cigarettes, but that rate was whittled down through the committee process.

Incoming Senate President Gary Stevens, the bill's sponsor, said he plans to introduce another version in the new legislative session.

"Young kids are getting addicted to nicotine," the Kodiak Republican said on Tuesday.

"Honestly, we really need to address this issue."

A tax is an important tool toward that end, Stevens said. "We have found that, over the years, whenever we've increased the tobacco tax, the tax on tobacco itself, the usage has declined," he said.

Alaska in 1997 adopted what was, at the time, the nation's highest state tobacco tax, set at \$1 per 20-cigarette pack and a similar rate for other tobacco products. In 2004, the legislature approved another increase in the tax, which went into effect in two phases in 2005 and 2006. Alaska's state tobacco tax now stands at \$2 a pack – above the national average for U.S. states, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – and has not changed since 2006. Various local governments impose their own taxes, tax increases and other restrictions. Some, including Anchorage and Juneau, tax e-cigarettes.

The state's Tobacco Prevention and Control Program has ongoing projects to discourage e-cigarette use among youth, along with its wider projects aimed at helping people avoid or quit using tobacco.

One initiative promotes alternatives to suspension for students who violate school rules about tobacco and e-cigarette use. Instead of the punitive action of suspending students, some schools are directing student violators into health-education programs, Knight said. Among the schools and school districts now using this approach are the Kenai Peninsula School District, the Lower Kuskokwim School District and the high school in Nenana, Knight said.

Higher Native tobacco use has been a persistent health challenge

In Alaska as a whole, the rate of tobacco or nicotine product use was 26% in 2020. The rate has been stable since 2014, the report said. Of adults, 19% smoked cigarettes in 2020, representing a significant decline since 1997, when 27 percent of adults smoked. Alaskans' smoking rate continues to be higher than the national rate, which was 13% in 2020, the report noted. The report found that 57% of Alaska adult smokers as of 2020 had tried to quit within the prior year.

Among Alaska adults, 7% reported using smokeless tobacco, much higher than the national rate of 2%, the report said. Among high school students, 11% reported using smokeless tobacco in 2019, also much higher than the national rate of 4%.

The adult rate for e-cigarette use was 5% in 2020, about the same as the national rate for adult use, the report said.

A wide gap persists in rates of tobacco use among Alaska Natives and non-Natives, something the Department of Health has been trying to address for several years. Among Alaska Natives, 49% reported some kind of tobacco use in 2020, a rate largely unchanged since 2014. Those statistics show the importance of the department's ongoing work with tribal health organizations, which are "trusted providers of education," Knight said.

There is a corresponding geographic gap, with much higher use in northern and western Alaska, where populations are largely Native, than in urban areas and Southeast Alaska.

That could reflect the difficulties that people in rural areas have in accessing the services that will help them quit using tobacco, Knight said. "The fewer steps you have to take to reach out for help, the more likely you are to reach out for help."

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