

## **CDC: 1 in 8 deaths among Nebraskans, Iowans ages 20-64 related to alcohol**

Written by Alia Conley

About one in eight deaths of Nebraskans and Iowans ages 20 to 64 in recent years can be attributed to alcohol use, according to a study published this week.

The study, from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, looked at wide-ranging deaths that could be linked to drinking, such as motor vehicle wrecks, suicides, falls and cancers.

Chris Wagner, the executive director of Project Extra Mile, a coalition that aims to reduce alcohol consumption, said the Nebraska numbers were not surprising.

"I think it's not shocking, sadly, when you look at our state," he said. "We're really typically in the top five worst binge-drinking states in the country, and that's where a lot of these harms come from."

"It's primarily because alcohol is relatively cheap in our state, and it's pretty much everywhere," he said.

Another CDC report released Friday found that the nationwide rate of alcohol-related deaths increased 26% to about 13 deaths per 100,000 Americans in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

That's the highest rate recorded in at least 40 years, said the report's lead author, Merianne Spencer.

Excessive drinking is associated with chronic dangers such as liver cancer, high blood pressure, stroke and heart disease. Drinking by pregnant women can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth or birth defects. And health officials say alcohol is a factor in as many as one-third of serious falls among the elderly.

It's also a risk to others through drunken driving or alcohol-fueled violence.

The alcohol-related death rate had been increasing for the past two decades, by 7% or less each year. The year 2020 marked a jump of more than 3½ times.

Such deaths are 2½ times more common in men than in women, but rose for both in 2020, the study found. The rate continued to be highest for people ages 55 to 64, but rose dramatically for certain other groups, including jumping 42% among women ages 35 to 44.

The study that looked at state deaths determined that about a quarter of deaths of Nebraska and Iowa adults ages 20 to 34 from 2015 to 2019 can be attributed to excessive alcohol use.

Those figures were similar to the nationwide number.

Nebraska and Iowa also closely matched the nationwide percentage of alcohol-related deaths for adults ages 35 to 49 and 50 to 64 years old, which are 17.5% and 9.5%, respectively.

In Douglas County, 2019 marked the largest number of alcohol abuse deaths in the last decade, with 33. That figure has grown since a low of four such deaths in 2011.

Wagner said people usually think about the harm of alcohol and driving but don't often consider the effects of alcohol on their long-term health. He said people can make healthier choices to help themselves, but to decrease the state's 700-plus annual alcohol-related deaths, policy changes should be made to increase the price of alcohol and decrease the availability, among other measures.

"We've seen in Nebraska over 20-plus years, lawmakers have consistently enacted policies that benefit the alcohol industry and those that sell alcohol, but don't take into account public safety and health consequences," he said. "We've been moving in the wrong direction for a number of years."