

## **Op-ed: Too many Nebraskans are dying of alcohol-related cancers. Here's how to change that**

Written by Chris Wagner

April is Alcohol Awareness Month. Coincidentally, it is also Esophageal and Head & Neck Cancer Awareness Month.

These awareness months have more in common than many realize. That's because even moderate alcohol consumption increases the risk of developing these and at least five other types of cancer.

According to the CDC, Nebraska has 1,001 alcohol-related deaths per year due to excessive alcohol use, with 112 of those deaths being from alcohol-attributable cancers. What's particularly troubling is that any alcohol consumption elevates your risk for developing one of those cancers but the more you drink, the more at risk you put yourself.

That's a big problem for Nebraska. While we're middle of the road for the percentage of adults who report any drinking in the past 30 days, we're the third-worst state for binge drinking with nearly 20 percent of adults reporting binge drinking at least once in the past month.

The 2025 Surgeon General's Advisory on Alcohol and Cancer Risk made the alcohol & cancer connection even clearer. It noted that 16 percent of women who have less than one drink per week will develop an alcohol-related cancer in their lifetime.

That risk increases to 19 percent for one drink a day and 22 percent for two drinks a day. For men, the risk is lower but still notable: Less than one drink a week presents a 10 percent risk, which increases to 13 percent at two drinks per day.

The advisory recommends updating warning labels on alcoholic beverage containers to highlight cancer risk and recommended that the U.S. Dietary Guidelines account for alcohol's cancer risk so that Americans can be better informed about the health risks of alcohol consumption.

Unfortunately, the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines had the alcohol industry's fingerprints all over them. They removed minors under the age of 21 from the listed groups that should avoid alcohol.

The recommended limits on alcohol consumption were also replaced with a vague recommendation that Americans should "consume less alcohol for better overall health." There was also no mention of cancer or the fact that less than one drink per week increases your risk of developing an alcohol-related cancer.

Research shows that approximately 16,800 cancer deaths could be prevented if adults who drink excessively reduce their consumption to within the previously recommended limits found in the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines.

The good news is that states have the ability to regulate how alcohol is sold within their borders. It might surprise you to learn that many of our state senators understand the harms that alcohol causes in Nebraska — from the 1,001 annual deaths, to the underage drinking tragedies in the headlines, to the chronic diseases it causes, the crime, and the \$1.2 billion in annual economic costs that we all pay in one way or another through our tax dollars or insurance premiums.

Omaha-area high school students spent the better part of the last two years advocating for increasing the price of alcohol (Legislative Bill 330) so that the Nebraskans who drink the most pay the most and reduce their drinking and their burden on society.

Most senators that expressed a position on the issue supported an increase in the price of alcohol that could've generated tens of millions of dollars in revenue to address our state's ongoing budget deficit. Yet the power of the alcohol industry kept the bill stuck in the Revenue Committee

A similar price increase was used in Maryland and has produced exciting results — significant reductions in underage drinking (26%) and binge drinking (28%), adult binge drinking (17%), impaired driving among 15-34-year-olds (6%) and sexually-transmitted infections (24%). Lives were saved and Maryland communities were safer.

Evidence-based policies such as increasing the price will reduce alcohol-related cancers, crime, and economic costs. The only thing we lack is the political will needed to enact these policies. Why keep enriching the industry at the expense of our children's well-being and our community's safety? It will take a village to make this happen, but we are closer than you might think.

Chris Wagner is the executive director of Project Extra Mile, a network of community partnerships working to reduce alcohol-related harms statewide