

## Alaska Tobacco Facts: Alaska schools can help protect youth mental health by addressing nicotine use



## Vaping and mental health are closely connected.

Alaska high school students with anxiety or depression or students who seriously thought about suicide reported higher tobacco use.<sup>3</sup>

### School staff are essential to supporting youth mental health.

Many students in Alaska are struggling with both mental health and nicotine use. These two health issues are closely connected.

Nicotine is an addictive chemical known to harm brain development.<sup>1</sup> Nicotine use can impact growing brains and learning, memory, and mood.<sup>1</sup> All tobacco products contain nicotine. These can include cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, e-cigarettes, nicotine pouches, Iqmik and more. These products have other known health harms too.<sup>2</sup>

Iqmik, also known as blackbull, is a form of smokeless tobacco used in some places across Alaska. Like other forms of smokeless tobacco, [Iqmik](#) contains nicotine.

Almost  
**1 out of 4**



(23%) of Alaska high school students use tobacco products including e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches

Data Source: Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) 2023

### Vaping and mental health are closely connected.

In 2023, Alaska high school students with anxiety or depression or students who seriously thought about suicide reported higher tobacco use.<sup>3</sup>

#### Young people may be turning to vaping and other nicotine use to handle hard feelings.<sup>4</sup>

These include stress, anxiety, and depression. But nicotine use can actually worsen mental health and increase feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression.<sup>5</sup> Using nicotine is not an effective way to deal with these feelings.

### Schools are integral to protecting youth mental health.

School staff are often first to notice if a student is struggling.<sup>6</sup> Staff also detect tobacco and nicotine use on school property.

In 2023, almost 1 out of 4 high school students (23%) used a tobacco product, including e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches.<sup>3</sup> Alaska schools are seeing tobacco and e-cigarette use suspensions at unprecedented numbers across all grade levels.<sup>7</sup>

In the 2023-2024 school year, **there were over 987 students who received tobacco-related school suspensions.** This included students as young as first grade.<sup>7</sup>

### Schools can take steps to promote mental health and to help young people stop using nicotine.

#### Schools can:

- **Coordinate** with local mental health resources to provide student support.
- **Put in place** alternative to suspension programs for tobacco and nicotine use. These programs support students staying in school.
- **Train** all school staff to respond to youth mental health and tobacco use in schools.
- **Invest** in school support staff like counselors, social workers, and mental health resources.
- **Engage** parents and the community in discussions about supportive school environments.

## Resources for schools

### Alternative to Suspension Programs for Schools

- **INDEPTH:** The American Lung Association's Intervention for Nicotine Dependence: Education, Prevention, Tobacco and Health (INDEPTH) is an alternative model for violation of school tobacco, vaping, or nicotine use policies. Facilitator training is provided at no cost. <https://www.lung.org/quit-smoking/helping-teens-quit/indepth>.
- **Healthy Futures – Nicotine Version:** Stanford Medicine's Tobacco Prevention toolkit offers Healthy Futures curriculum for free as an alternative model. <https://med.stanford.edu/halpern-felsher-reach-lab/preventions-interventions/healthy-futures.html>.

### Tobacco Training Resources

- **E-Cigarette Use Among Alaska Teens:** This course provides information about the health harms associated with youth vaping and how to prevent vaping at school. Log in to your eLearning account at <https://education.alaska.gov/ELearning>.
- **Ask-Counsel-Treat to Address Youth Cessation:** This online course provides an overview for school personnel, community members, and healthcare professionals in conducting brief interventions for teens who use tobacco. <https://lung.training/courses/act-to-address-youth-cessation.html>.

### Mental Health Resources for Schools

- **Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practice in Alaska:** This framework was developed in Alaska to implement trauma-informed practices in schools to improve places of learning. <https://education.alaska.gov/apps/traumawebtoolkit/new-framework-page.html>.
- **Positive Behavior Supports:** This website provides schools and districts with resources to implement positive behavior support to improve academic performance and school safety. <https://education.alaska.gov/swpbs>.

## Resources to share with students

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text **988** to connect with a trained crisis counselor. 24/7, free and confidential help is available for those struggling or in crisis.
- **211 Alaska:** Explore available mental health and substance use disorder services in Alaska.
- **AK Live Vape Free Teen Texting Program** (For teens ages 13–17): Text **VAPEFREE** to **873373** to join a confidential texting program to learn about vaping and get support to quit.
- **Not Buying It:** Students can visit this Alaska teen-focused campaign for more resources and information about nicotine. [NotBuyingItAK.com](http://NotBuyingItAK.com).



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### Resources to share with parents

- **Pediatric Symptom Checklist:** This general mental health screening guide from Mental Health America helps parents and caregivers learn what a child is experiencing. <https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools/parent/>.
- **The Live Vape Free program:** This online resource is for parents and other adults concerned about teen use of e-cigarettes. Live Vape Free provides personalized support, tips, and resources to start conversations with teens about vaping. <https://www.rallyhealth.com/live-vape-free>.
- **Parents Against Vaping E-Cigarettes campaign:** This national parent organization educates and empowers parents and communities to safeguard the health of children. <https://www.parentsagainstvaping.org/>.



### Resources to share with health care providers

- **From Vapes to Victory: Empowering teens to overcome vaping:** This training for pediatricians overviews the Ask-Counsel-Treat model to treat nicotine addiction in teens. <https://cpd.education.bcm.edu/content/vapes-victory-empowering-teens-overcome-vaping#group-tabs-node-course-default5>.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Leslie FM. Unique, long-term effects of nicotine on adolescent brain. *Pharmacol Biochem Behav.* 2020;197:173010. doi:10.1016/j.pbb.2020.173010
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [Smoking Cessation: A Report of the Surgeon General](#). Published online 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> Alaska Department of Health, Division of Public Health, Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2023. Available by request.
- <sup>4</sup> Gorfinkel L, Hasin D, Miech R, Keyes KM. The Link Between Depressive Symptoms and Vaping Nicotine in U.S. Adolescents, 2017–2019. *J Adolesc Health.* 2022;70(1):133-139. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.07.003
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [E-Cigarette Use Among Youth and Young Adults: A Report of the Surgeon General](#). Published online 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Office of the Surgeon General. [Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory](#). Published online 2021.
- <sup>7</sup> Alaska Department of Education and Early Development. "12.2.2024 Tobacco Incidents 2015-2024 Suppressed" Excel, Emailed December 5, 2024.

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