



MICAP

Michigan Council
on Alcohol Problems

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MICAP

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Alcohol Problems

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Our Work on A Public Health Problem

By Michael MacLaren, MICAP President

Last February we told you about an effort to address drunk driving in Michigan -- a public health crisis that kills 300-plus people in this state and almost 10,000 nationwide each year. I want to update you on the Michigan Council on Alcohol Problems (MICAP) actions to introduce and enact legislation "lowering the blood-alcohol content (BAC) threshold for impairment while driving from .08% to .05%."

First, some background:

The United States trails the rest of the world in lowering the drunken driving standard. The United States has a more lenient BAC for drunk driving than 100 other countries; nearly all the European, Asian, and South American countries have adopted a lower standard.

Since 2004 all 50 states have set a BAC level of .08, reflecting the percentage of alcohol, by volume, in the blood. A .08 BAC is equivalent to consuming approximately 3-4 drinks in an hour. In 2013 the National Transportation Safety Board issued a recommendation to states to lower the blood alcohol content to a level of .05 BAC that constitutes drunk driving.

In 2019, Utah lowered its threshold to .05 BAC and saw drunk driving deaths reduced by nearly 20 percent while rates around the rest of the nation increased. Since the .05% BAC limit enactment alcohol sales continued to increase -- up 22.9% through 2023 -- and sales tax revenues from restaurants, rental cars, hotels and resorts, air travel into the state, and state and national park visits followed suit.

Now, the update:

MICAP has asked a number of groups -- from public safety and insurance organizations to medical and hospitality interests -- to explore drafting legislation that would reduce traffic accidents while not putting revenue to the hospitality industry or state coffers at risk. We have formed an ".05 Saves Lives" coalition with several groups that have drafted issue briefs, testified before the Michigan Liquor Control Commission, contacted legislators and done presentations to various groups around the state to stimulate grass roots support for the initiative. Among our initial collaborators:

- MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving)
- SMARTER USA (Skilled Motorcyclist Association)
- CUYFD (Center For Urban Youth and Family Development)

Our message is clear: Lower traffic fatalities, yet high hospitality and tax revenue... that's what's possible by adopting a .05 BAC in Michigan.

We hope you will consider joining us in this effort. As a 501(c)(3), MICAP has limited resources to fund this initiative. Your contributions could make a powerful difference in addressing the public health crisis of drunk driving in Michigan. We hope you will consider a (TAX-EXEMPT) contribution. You can visit us online to donate and learn more at micap.org/support-micap.

Alcohol Is Prominently In the News in 2025

By Vernon K. Smith, MICAP Board

**It's 2025, and alcohol issues have already been making headlines this year.
Here are a few of the top stories:**

U.S. Surgeon General Issues Warning on Alcohol and Cancer

On January 3, the U.S. Surgeon General issued recommendations to update labels on alcoholic beverages to include warnings that alcohol is linked to several types of cancer, including breast and colon.

“Alcohol is a well-established, preventable cause of cancer responsible for about 100,000 cases of cancer and 20,000 cancer deaths annually – greater than the 13,500 alcohol-associated traffic crash fatalities per year in the U.S. – yet the majority of Americans are unaware of this risk.”

The National Institutes for Health has repeatedly reported research that alcohol use is associated with seven types of cancer, including colon-rectal, esophagus, liver, mouth, throat, voice box for men and women, and breast cancer for women.

Recent studies have shown alcohol consumption also to be linked to certain forms of heart disease, such as atrial fibrillation, a heart arrhythmia.

The World Health Organization classifies alcohol as a high-risk carcinogen, in the same class as tobacco, asbestos, and formaldehyde, stating: “There is no safe amount that does not affect health.”

The New York Times reported in its January 4 story on the Surgeon General’s Advisory that at least 47 nations mandate warnings on alcoholic beverages. Ireland will have new labels next year that say there’s a “direct link between alcohol and fatal cancers.”

The current U.S. warning label hasn’t changed since 1988. Congress must act to require updated warning labels, which currently only mention the risks of driving, adverse effects on health, and a developing fetus, but do not mention cancer.

According to The New York Times, the Trump Administration may not support such a change, even though “Donald J. Trump does not drink, and his choice to head the Health and Human Services Department, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., swore off alcohol and drugs decades ago, and says he regularly attends AA meetings.”

“Why, Exactly, Is Alcohol So Bad For You?”

“The tide has largely turned against alcohol.”

This is the opening sentence of a major story in the January 28 Time Magazine.

“Drinking, at least in moderation, was once seen as a harmless – or even healthy – indulgence ... But in many scientific circles, consuming virtually any amount of alcohol is now seen as toxic.”

The article highlights in detail how the human body metabolizes alcohol, creating toxic byproducts and inflammation, affecting hormones, damaging organs like the liver, pancreas, and brain, and the places alcohol first touches, the mouth, throat, and stomach.

It highlights the fact that 30% of alcohol-related deaths are due to accidents and injuries when intoxicated.

Finally, the Time article takes on the claim that a nightly glass of red wine improves heart health. It correctly points to studies that support the possible benefit, while also noting that “design flaws in older studies falsely inflated the cardiovascular benefits of drinking. In some studies that correct those flaws, booze’s apparent health benefits disappear.”

The Truth about Alcohol and Your Health

On January 23, a Northwell Health report highlighted recent research and current trends and attitudes toward alcohol. Looking first at trends in consumption, the report cites a Gallup poll that fewer Americans are drinking alcohol now. The most recent National Survey on Drug Use and Health conducted by Gallup found that 58% of Americans drank an alcoholic beverage in 2022, a full 5 percentage points less than the historical average since 1939.

Younger adults lead the downward trend. Over the past 20 years, the share of young adults who say they drink has dropped from 72% to 59%.

Gallup said younger people are more likely now to choose non-alcoholic drinks.

Among younger adults ages 18-35, a 2024 Gallup poll found 6 of 10 agreed that drinking is bad for one's health, compared to 4 of 10 among adults over age 35. Across all Americans, 45% said drinking one or two alcoholic beverages a day is unhealthy, the highest level since Gallup began tracking that question in 2001. The vast majority of Americans (86%) now agree that drinking any amount of alcohol is at least "somewhat harmful".

Binge drinking is especially concerning because it can be deadly. About 61,000 Americans die each year from binge drinking, according to the CDC. Gallup reports that binge drinking has been declining; in 2024, of people who drink, only 16% said they sometimes drink more than they should, a dramatic drop from the all-time high of 35% in 1989.

Men are more likely to binge drink than women, but when women drink, they are more likely to develop alcohol-related liver disease.

Alcohol and Your Health: Risks, Benefits and Controversies

On January 27, a Harvard Health report, authored by Robert H. Shmerling, MD, Senior Faculty Editor, addressed current issues relating to alcohol and health.

The report underscores the link between alcohol and cancers, indicating that it is the reason for the Surgeon General's January advisory and the need for stronger warning labels that mention cancer. The report goes on to list other known health effects of alcohol use, including:

- liver disease, cirrhosis, life-threatening liver failure requiring a liver transplant
- a higher risk of high blood pressure, heart failure, and dementia
- a higher risk of injury from drunk driving and falls, homicides and suicides
- lapses in judgment, like risky sexual behavior or use of drugs
- depression, anxiety, and addiction
- fetal alcohol syndrome, causing developmental abnormalities and brain damage
- alcohol poisoning: if you drink enough alcohol, it can be fatal.
- Disruption of bonds with a spouse, family, friends, coworkers, or employers.

The report concludes that "even with more restrictive guidelines or new warning labels, it's likely that plenty of folks will accept the risks of drinking alcohol. Still, it is important to know what those risks are."

Booze vs. Weed: Debate Over Which Is Worse Continues

In February, alcohol issues were the topic in two important articles in The Wall Street Journal, each authored by health writer Sumathi Reddy.

The February 5 article begins this way: "A renewed focus on alcohol's health effects has rekindled a common debate: Is alcohol or marijuana worse for you? Sorry, folks, but the short answer is that both can be bad."

"Alcohol is in the hot seat," the article says, referring to the recent Surgeon General's advisory and recommended updates to warning labels to mention its links to seven cancers.

Marijuana's links to cancer are less researched because it has been legal for a short time. Decades of research are needed to answer the question definitively. Still, a study published last August in JAMA Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery found those with cannabis-use disorder to be 3.5 to 5 times more likely to be diagnosed with head and neck cancers compared to those without that diagnosis.

The article notes that alcohol and marijuana share certain negative effects. "They impair short- and long-term cognitive functioning. This impairs judgment, attention span and coordination, raising the risk of vehicle accidents, falls and other injuries. Both can also become addictive and can have significant mental health consequences."

Few Are Aware Alcohol Raises the Risk of Certain Cancers

"We all know cigarettes cause cancer. The memo on booze hasn't reached everyone yet," Sumathi Reddy wrote in The Wall Street Journal on February 24.

According to Jennifer Hay, who studies how people make decisions about cancer risk at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, about 70% of Americans don't know alcohol is a risk factor for cancer.

She added: "Awareness is really frustratingly low. We really need to make all of those changes in alcohol that we did with tobacco."

The doctors quoted in this article were consistent in their advice. Dr. Cindy Cen, a breast surgeon at Northwell Health Cancer Institute in New York, advises her patients to limit drinks to two per week. She said even pouring a smaller glass of wine can help.

This is especially true for breast and esophageal cancers, for which risk increases even with light drinking, and goes up with each additional drink.

Featured in the article is Lauren Nostro, a 35-year-old diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer at age 30. Before she had cancer, she said she was unaware that alcohol was a risk factor.

Ms. Nostro, who quit drinking three years ago, concluded: "When you actually learn about the negative effects of alcohol, especially as it relates to women and cancer, there's no justification for me to do it. It's like, why even?"

Your impact starts here: join the fight
against drunk driving.

Your gift will help us enact change and save lives.

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“Studies show a link between regular consumption of more than moderate use of alcohol and a 22% higher Alzheimer's risk compared to nondrinkers. For many years, moderate alcohol use has been defined as having no more than seven drinks per week for women and 14 drinks per week for men.

However, many experts are now questioning whether moderate drinking should mean even lower amounts.”

- *Harvard Healthbeat, Harvard Health Publishing, 3/25/2025*

Got a question, concern, or idea for MICAP? We'd love to hear it!
We can be reached via email at admin@micap.org.