

Heavy drinking is taking a deadly toll on young people

By MATTHEW MARTINEZ
McClatchy Washington Bureau

From 1999 to 2016, liver disease deaths rose 65 percent, a study by two University of Michigan professors found.

Young Americans who drink are bearing the brunt of that trend, said Elliot Tapper and Neehar Parikh, the study's authors.

Young people seem to be drinking themselves to death at a higher rate than ever before. For adults ages 25 to 34, the increase in deaths in those years has been driven entirely by alcohol-related liver disease.

"We thought we would see improvements, but these data make it clear: even after hepatitis C, we will still have

our work cut out for us," Tapper, a member of the University of Michigan Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology and health services researcher at the U-M Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation, told Science Daily. "Each alcohol-related death means decades of lost life, broken families and lost economic productivity. In addition, medical care of those dying from cirrhosis costs billions of dollars."

Deaths of young adults due to liver failure rose by an average of 10.5 percent per year from 2009 to 2016, according to the study. Tapper and Parikh examined death certificates for nearly 600,000 adults from the Vital Statistics Cooperative and population data from the U.S.

Census Bureau.

Tapper called the trend "disturbing."

Deaths from cirrhosis rose from 20,661 in 1999 to 34,174 in 2016. Cirrhosis is defined by scarring of the liver, caused by long-term damage, from prolonged drinking, hepatitis C or what's known as fatty liver disease.

Deaths from liver cancer more than doubled in the same period, from 5,112 in 1999 to 11,073 in 2016, according to the study. Just days before Tapper and Parikh's study was released, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said that from 2000 to 2106, deaths in adults 25 and older from liver cancer rose 43 percent.

Prolonged heavy drinking is a known cause of liver cancer.