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Chronic disease costs Ala. economy \$23B

BY JIMMY DeBUTTS | STAFF

Costs associated with ailments such as diabetes and heart disease created a \$23.3 billion-per-year drag on Alabama's economy and threatens to drain businesses more in coming years.

Chronic diseases cost Alabama dearly in lost productivity and absenteeism, according to the Milken Institute's "An Unhealthy America: The Economic Burden of Chronic Disease" study.

The economic impact ranked Alabama 41st in the country – and costs are projected to skyrocket to \$66.8 billion by 2023 if measures for improving treatment and prevention of chronic diseases are not implemented.

Milken said chronic disease costs American businesses \$1.1 trillion each year in economic loss associated with preventable illness and its impact on the nation's Gross National Product. Lost growth for American businesses is projected by Milken to balloon to \$5.7 trillion by the middle of the century.

Alabama businesses can help curb those losses by offering incentives to employees who exercise, don't smoke or adopt healthy lifestyles, said Kevin Klowden, managing economist at the Milken Institute.

Obesity also is a prevalent problem in Alabama that must be addressed to cut chronic disease incidents in the state, Klowden said.

In 2006, Alabama had the nation's worst obesity rate at 30 percent. Klowden said the state needs to return to the 1990 level when less than 15 percent were obese. Trimming obesity levels is pivotal to cutting costs asso-

THE BOTTOM 10

The worst states according to the Milken Institute's rankings of chronic disease risk factors and prevalence.

Ranking of States

41. Alabama
42. Oklahoma
43. Maine
44. Rhode Island
45. Pennsylvania
46. Mississippi
47. Kentucky
48. Arkansas
49. Tennessee
50. West Virginia

SOURCE: The Milken Institute

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ciated with diabetes, hypertension, stroke and heart disease.

"Businesses can provide organized incentives for people to be in shape," Klowden said. "Businesses should encourage more people to get more screening done."

Klowden said increased screening ultimately keeps costs down and drives mortality rates up by diagnosing diseases in earlier stages or recognizing symptoms before they become disease. Businesses can help alleviate absenteeism and lost productivity by organizing access to exercise facilities and working with health care providers to give incentives to employees who don't drink or smoke. They should also encourage eating in moderation, Klowden said.

Behavioral Health Systems Director of Education and Training Divisions Judi Braswell said businesses should address health risk problems proactively through

behavioral management. Braswell said some companies encourage participation in health risk appraisals by offering incentives such as gift certificates or discounts on health care premiums.

The key for employers is knowing what motivates their employees, she said. By working with companies that provide health care and wellness programs, companies can educate, train and assist workers looking to lower their health risks.

"We're being asked to work much more closely to combat chronic illness," Braswell said. "We can turn that education into action. We work with them to develop a plan."

Behavioral Health links employees with nutritionists and therapists who work as a team to motivate and support employees, Braswell said. Companies that offer discounted health insurance premiums to lower-risk employees conduct health risk assessments yearly to ensure employees maintain a healthy status. It also offers other employees a chance to secure the premium discounts.

"The more we're incentivized, the more we participate," Braswell said.

The Milken report said modest improvements in prevention and disease treatments could reduce the economic impact of chronic disease \$18.1 billion annually by 2023. Utah, Alaska, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona received the highest rankings in the Milken's study. Klowden said healthier lifestyles and lower incidents of obesity, drinking and smoking boosted those states' rankings.

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