Obesity in Native Communities

The obesity epidemic is growing at an alarming rate in Native communities. Consider this:

- American Indian or Alaska Native adults are 60% more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic Whites.¹ In 2011, Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders were 30 percent more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic Whites.²

- American Indian children are experiencing obesity at a startling rate with 31.2% of four-year-olds currently obese, which is a rate higher than any other racial or ethnic group, according to a 2009 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- Obesity is an independent risk factor for heart disease. Although heart disease was rarely noted in American Indians earlier in this century, in the past decade cardiovascular disease has become the leading cause of death in American Indians.³ Obesity is also related to increased risk for type 2 diabetes.

The trickle-down effect of these statistics has severe consequences as major health problems are dramatically elevated when coupled with obesity. Obesity is associated with increased mortality rates and increases the risks of heart disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer. Obesity limits full mobility and a range of life activity that profoundly affects the quality of life. Obesity is of particular concern for our children, since overweight adolescents have a 70% chance of becoming overweight or obese adults.

Impact on Our Communities and Our Cultures

Obesity threatens our greatest resource – our children. They are the next generation of caretakers of our cultures and languages. If the obesity rates do not improve our young people may not live as long or healthy lives as their parents and grandparents, which will have devastating effects on Native communities. Obesity has become a concern among American Indians only within the past generation or two. Native people traditionally had a holistic approach to health with lifestyles that included planting, foraging, hunting, fishing and harvesting foods – active lifestyles associated with sustainable food practices.

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Many Native people still carry on these traditions today and Native communities are committed to ensuring they are passed on to future generations. There is a movement in Indian Country to ensure that Native people live happy, healthy and long lives by reducing obesity rates. In some communities, this means going back to the traditional diets of our elders, who teach us that we have the answers in our own traditional knowledge to solve the obesity epidemic in our communities.

Did you know?

Traditional pre-reservation diets are considered the gold standard and ones that nutritionists recommend for people today. That’s because traditional Native diets were full of lean meats, protein, fruits and vegetables and low in fat, refined sugars and sodium.

- Native Americans discovered and cultivated food crops that currently account for more than 52 percent of all foods now consumed by people worldwide.
- Native communities have fought to retain over 54 million acres of their land base in the United States, making them collectively the single largest private owner of agricultural land. By taking a lead role in local food production, we will regain control of one of the most significant assets we have. Thus, direct management of food supplies will eventually give tribes use of their land, deliberate control of health, sustainability of their environment, and maintenance or revitalization of cultural integrity.

Prevention Tips

- Eat and serve more healthy traditional foods when you can;
- Eat more fruits and vegetables and fewer foods high in fat and sugar;
- Choose to drink water instead of sugary drinks;
- Break down your exercise into smaller chunks. Try just a 10-minute brisk walk, 3 times a day, 5 days a week.; and
- Talk to the schools and employers in your community and promote programs that help people make healthy choices, such as offering more healthy snacks, traditional foods and activity breaks during the day.

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For more information, visit:

✦ In June 2009, the Obesity Prevention and Strategies for Native Youth Initiative was launched by the National Indian Health Board (NIHB) to address childhood obesity among AI/AN youth. [www.nihb.org/public_health/obesity_prevention_youth.php](http://www.nihb.org/public_health/obesity_prevention_youth.php).


✦ BMI provides a reliable indicator of body fatness for most people and is used to screen for weight categories that may lead to health problems. This site provides a tool to calculate body mass index, or BMI. [www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/).

✦ For tips on addressing adult obesity. [www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/AdultObesity/#Whatcanbedone](http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/AdultObesity/#Whatcanbedone)

✦ For strategies to avoid obesity in children [www.cdc.gov/obesity/strategies/family.html](http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/strategies/family.html).

For healthy recipes, visit:

✦ The Chickasaw Nation in partnership with the USDA has designed a program titled Get Fresh! With lists of recipes that can be viewed online. [http://getfreshcooking.com/](http://getfreshcooking.com/).


✦ For a list of healthy traditional recipes from the American Indian Health and Diet Project. [www.aihd.ku.edu/recipes/index.html](http://www.aihd.ku.edu/recipes/index.html).