

Diabetes Among American Indians and Alaska Natives



November is Diabetes Awareness Month & American Indian Heritage Month

American Indian and Alaska Native adults are twice as likely to have diagnosed type 2 diabetes than non-Hispanic whites. Rates of diagnosed diabetes among American Indians and Alaska Natives younger than 35 doubled from 1994–2004.

People with diabetes can experience devastating complications, including heart disease and stroke, blindness, chronic kidney disease, and amputations. But people with diabetes, working with their support network and health care providers, can take steps to control the disease and lower the risk of complications and premature death.

There are several types of diabetes. **Type 1 diabetes** accounts for about five percent of all diagnosed cases. **Type 2 diabetes** accounts for 90 to 95 percent of all diagnosed cases. **Gestational diabetes** only appears in pregnant women and develops in two to ten percent of all pregnancies. It usually disappears when a pregnancy is over. However, if not treated, it can cause problems for mothers and babies. Other types of diabetes result from specific genetic conditions, surgery, drugs, infections, and other illnesses, and count for one to five percent of all diagnosed cases.

Diabetes Among Ethnic Populations

Differences in the prevalence of diabetes by race/ethnicity are partially attributable to age differences. Data from the 2009 Indian Health Services' (IHS) National Patient Information Reporting System (NPIRS) indicate that 14.2 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives aged 20 years or older who received care from IHS had diagnosed diabetes. After adjusting for population age differences, 16.1 percent of the total adult population served by IHS had diagnosed diabetes, with rates varying by region from 5.5 percent among Alaska Native adults to 33.5 percent among American Indian adults in southern Arizona.

National estimates of diagnosed diabetes for some but not all minority groups are available from national survey data and from IHS NPIRS which includes data for approximately 1.9 million American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States who receive health care from the IHS.

"There are many – and sometimes competing, explanations for why racial and ethnic health disparities exist," said Leandris Liburd, director of the CDC Office of Minority Health and Health Equity. "The reasons range from heredity and other biological differences to social, economic, political, and cultural factors. Therefore, both individual and societal approaches to reduce health disparities are needed."

CDC saves lives and protects people by working with and providing guidance to state and local health partners to address a variety of health threats.

The CDC Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health program (REACH) serves as the cornerstone of the agency's efforts to eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities among African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics/Latinos, Asian Americans, Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders. REACH communities use a variety of strategies to improve factors that impact health, including counseling, education and policy change. CDC is also involved in the National Diabetes Prevention Program, a public-private partnership among community organizations, private insurers, government agencies, employers, and health care organizations, collaborating to build and grow the network that establishes lifestyle intervention programs in communities.

Staying Healthy with Diabetes Healthy eating, physical activity, and blood glucose testing are the basic therapies for type 2 diabetes. Many people with type 2 diabetes require oral medication, insulin, or both to control blood glucose levels. Healthy eating, physical activity, and insulin injections are the basic therapies for type 1 diabetes. The amount of insulin taken must be balanced with food intake and daily activities. Blood glucose levels must be closely monitored through frequent blood glucose testing.

People should also see a health care provider who will monitor their diabetes control and help them learn to manage their diabetes. People with diabetes also may see ophthalmologists for eye examinations; podiatrists for routine foot care; and dietitians and diabetes educators who teach the skills needed for daily diabetes management.

"For individuals, adopting a healthy lifestyle and receiving recommended health screenings are first steps of saving lives through prevention," Liburd said. "Unfortunately, not all communities have the same access to the resources and health care services necessary for a healthy lifestyle and early detection of diseases like heart disease, cancer, and diabetes – which are among the leading causes of death."

CDC offers several programs to support type 2 diabetes prevention in American Indian/Alaska Native communities. The Traditional Foods Project is a five-year program with 17 tribes/organizations to; reclaim local, traditional foods, and related physical activity, while strengthening social support.

The Eagle Books were developed by the CDC Division of Diabetes Translation's Native Diabetes Wellness Program, in collaboration with the Tribal Leaders Diabetes Committee and the Indian Health Service, in response to the rising rate of diabetes among Native Americans and the need for type 2 diabetes prevention materials for children. To learn more about the Eagle Books Educator's Guide, which offers strategies for teaching children about preventing type 2 diabetes, visit the [Eagle's Nest](http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/eagle) page at www.cdc.gov/diabetes/eagle.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services launched the Million Hearts initiative, aimed at preventing 1 million heart attacks and strokes over the next 5 years. People with diabetes are 2 to 4 times more likely to die from heart disease and have 2 to 4 times the risk of stroke than those without the disease. More information is available at <http://millionhearts.hhs.gov>.

Additional Resources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes>, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs>

National Diabetes Education Program, a joint program of NIH and CDC: <http://www.yourdiabetesinfo.org>

Indian Health Service: <http://www.ihs.gov/MedicalPrograms/Diabetes/index.asp>

CDC Works for You 24/7: <http://www.cdc.gov/24-7/>