

Aboriginal children's health

Poverty has a profound impact on the health and welfare of Aboriginal children. Indigenous women are more likely to give birth to underweight babies than non-indigenous women. Most Aboriginal babies are breastfed, which offers protection against various illnesses in the first six months of life. However, limited access to a range of fresh, wholesome foods after weaning means that many children are undernourished. Malnutrition reduces immunity, so children are more likely to catch infections. Infections place further nutritional demands on the body, creating a vicious circle. The high rate of smoking in the indigenous population means that children are exposed to tobacco smoke before birth and in the family home, which increases their risks of respiratory conditions such as asthma.

Low birth weight

The infant mortality rate among indigenous people is three times higher than the national average, or 15.2 deaths per 1,000 births compared to five per 1,000. Low birth weight is associated with an increased risk of neonatal death and various diseases in later life, including diabetes and cardiovascular disease. The length of the pregnancy and the growth rate of the baby during pregnancy affect the weight of the baby at birth. An Aboriginal woman is twice as likely (12.4%) to have a low birth weight baby compared to a non-Aboriginal woman (6.2%). Across Australia, low birth weight varies from less than seven per cent in the Victorian indigenous population to over 20 per cent in northern areas.

Contributing factors to low birth weight

Over one quarter of low birth weight cases are thought to be caused by maternal malnutrition. Other maternal factors that may contribute to the risk of a low weight baby include:

- Poverty
- Insufficient weight gain during pregnancy
- Little or no antenatal care
- Cigarette smoking
- Young age
- Anaemia
- Urinary infections
- High blood pressure
- Alcohol.

Breastfeeding rates are high

Indigenous women breastfeed their children for longer than non-indigenous women. According to one study in the Northern Territory, around 70 per cent of children were breastfed until the age of six months or longer. Breastfed babies have a lower rate of gastrointestinal and respiratory illnesses than bottle-fed babies.

Growth patterns for children

Aboriginal children have poorer growth than non-Aboriginal children after weaning. Malnutrition in early childhood has been linked to problems with mental development and disorders including anaemia and recurring infections. Infections place extra nutritional demands on the body, which creates a vicious circle. Without enough nourishing food, the child runs the risk of never reaching its full height.

Hospitalisation

Indigenous people are nearly twice as likely to be admitted to hospital than non-indigenous people. For children aged 15 years and under, the main reasons for hospitalisation include diseases of the chest and throat, injuries caused by accidents and middle ear infections.

Middle ear infections

Middle ear infection is one of the most common reasons for hospital admission among Aboriginal children. These infections are caused by either bacteria or viruses and can be triggered by a cold. Babies and young children are more likely to develop middle ear infections because they are still building up their immunity. The pus or fluid can cause mild deafness. Recurring infections are likely to hamper speech development and interfere with schooling.

Passive smoking

According to the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, the Victorian Koori population has the highest rate of cigarette smoking (57.1%) of any State or Territory. Around nine out of 10 indigenous children aged five years and under are constantly exposed to cigarette smoke in the home, with babies experiencing the highest exposure rate. Passive smoking leads to an increased risk of respiratory disorders such as asthma.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and Child Health nurse
- Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Co-op Ltd Tel. (03) 9419 3000

Things to remember

- Poverty has a profound impact on the health and welfare of Aboriginal children.
- Limited access to a range of fresh, wholesome foods means that many children are undernourished.
- Malnutrition increases the risk of infection.
- More than 90 per cent of Aboriginal children are exposed to cigarette smoke in the home.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Victorian Aboriginal Health Service

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