

Aboriginal health - barriers to physical activity

In general, Indigenous Australians are less physically active than the rest of the population. Lack of regular exercise increases the risk of developing health conditions such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease. The rate of these illnesses is high in the Indigenous Australian population.

There are social, cultural and economic reasons why Indigenous people may not take part in physical activity. Research into the exercise habits of Indigenous Australians is limited but it suggests that they are less active than the rest of the population (who are generally not very active either).

Poverty is a major factor

Research around the world consistently finds a direct link between poverty and ill health. Compared to non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Australians:

- Have a lower level of education
- Are more likely to be unemployed
- Earn less money
- Are less likely to own their homes.

Cultural barriers to exercise

Some of the cultural barriers to exercise specific to Indigenous Australians include:

Attitudes to personal health – an Indigenous person's connections to family, ancestors, the wider community and the land are very important to the choices they make about all aspects of their lives. This attitude can affect health in a number of ways. For example, sharing meals is an important way to strengthen family ties. If the family meal is takeaway food, someone with a health complaint will eat with the family rather than isolate themselves by making healthier food choices.

Importance of relationships – spending time with family and loved ones is very important. Exercising alone for personal benefit may prevent a person from spending time with family and loved ones, and this may be seen as shameful. However, exercising to recover from a diagnosed illness is very important, because the person owes it to their loved ones to get better.

Other common barriers to exercise

Common social and environmental barriers to exercise include:

- Sports facilities and healthcare services are less available to people living in remote areas.
- Indigenous Australians experience racism at double the rate of non-Indigenous Australians, which affects participation and development within sport.
- People on low incomes may not choose to spend their limited funds on health, exercise or exercise equipment.
- Access to health information is often limited. For example, people living in remote areas have reduced opportunities to consult with doctors and other healthcare professionals.
- For people living in remote areas, access to transport is limited and it may be difficult to attend sporting events or exercise activities.
- Health promotion programs tend to focus on the individual benefits of regular exercise. It has been suggested that placing the focus on staying healthy for the sake of family members and descendants would be more meaningful to Indigenous Australians.
- Physical education programs in schools typically fail to accommodate Indigenous Australian students by ignoring their cultural practices.

- Indigenous Australian students may experience racism. Feeling isolated and misunderstood may cause a student to withdraw from school activities, including sport.
- Traditional games and dances are rarely included in physical education programs at schools.

Multiple health risks

A person's risk of ill health tends to increase when they have more risk factors. Limited physical activity is not the only health risk faced by Indigenous Australians. Compared to the rest of the population, Indigenous Australians (particularly those living in remote areas):

- Have higher rates of cigarette smoking
- Drink more alcohol
- Are more likely to be exposed to violence
- Are more likely to be obese
- Eat a nutritionally poor diet.

Poor diet

The typical Indigenous Australian diet is high in fats and salts and low in fresh fruits and vegetables. Some of the more common reasons for this include:

- Access to fresh foods for people living in remote areas is limited.
- Storing and preparing fresh food is difficult if the family lacks access to kitchen facilities or electricity.
- Compared to fresh food, takeaway and processed foods are readily available and don't require cooking.
- The purchasing of 'diet' or low fat foods for personal use is usually avoided because it associates the person with their health complaint and prevents them from sharing the family meal.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Co-op Ltd Tel. (03) 9419 3000
- Melbourne Aboriginal Youth, Sport and Recreation (MAYSAR) Tel. (03) 9486 9123
- Australian Indigenous Health*InfoNet* – this Indigenous Physical Activity web resource contains guidelines, resources, programs, projects and lessons, publications and links.

Things to remember

- Many Indigenous people in rural areas do not have access to facilities that would help them to be physically active.
- Exercising alone for personal benefit prevents a person from spending time with family and loved ones.
- Traditional games and dances are rarely included in physical education programs at schools.

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

Physical Activity Australia

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