Aboriginal health - barriers to physical activity

Summary

- Reduction in the physical activity levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over time, together with poor nutrition, has contributed to an increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have chronic diseases.
- For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the concept of physical activity is not thought of in the same way as for other Australians - engaging in an individual physical activity to benefit only yourself, away from family or community, may be seen as inappropriate or selfish.
- There are many community benefits to bringing traditional Indigenous games back to life.

Physical activity levels among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have changed over time, particularly since European colonisation. Until the late 18th century Australian Indigenous people led a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, which involved daily physical activity in searching for food and other resources.

The farming methods introduced by white settlers prevented many Indigenous peoples from accessing the land, and increasingly forced them to rely on the Europeans for food. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were moved to missions or towns and had to rely on food handouts. Their levels of physical activity and food quality were greatly reduced by these lifestyle changes – physical activity was no longer an everyday part of their life.

Reduction in the physical activity levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over time (particularly in the last 50 years or so), together with poor nutrition, has contributed to an increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have chronic diseases such as:

- heart disease
- diabetes
- high blood pressure
- other health conditions (such as being overweight or obese).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and physical activity

For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the concept of physical activity is not thought of in the same way as for other Australians. The activities that made up their traditional lifestyle, such as hunting, gathering and participation in customs and other traditions, were important and linked not only to health but to many other aspects of life, including:

- social structure
- education
- building and maintaining relationships
- building and maintaining wealth
- managing and preserving the environment.

These traditional activities helped shape the values of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today. For example, engaging in an individual physical activity to benefit only yourself, away from family or community, may be seen as inappropriate or selfish. Additionally, physical activity is not seen by many Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people as a separate, measureable activity, in the same way as it is for Australians from other cultural backgrounds.
Consequently, measuring levels and types of physical activity undertaken by Indigenous Australians may be affected by different understandings of what counts as physical activity.

Benefits of traditional games and sport for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have always played sport. Before European colonisation, they played a broad variety of traditional games, which were almost lost. Today, extensive consultation with Elders is necessary to re-establish the traditional games and their rules.

Traditional games are inclusive games and not competitive. For example, if a player gets 'out' in some games they can immediately rejoin the game once leaving the field.

The benefits of bringing traditional Indigenous games back to life include:

- bringing-together of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people
- helping to reconnect Indigenous urban youth to their culture
- boosting school attendance
- promoting reconciliation
- providing essential training in social interaction
- enhancing physical health.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people see traditional games as a strong indicator that their culture can survive. In this way traditional games are not only helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth to get physically fit but also inspiring older members of the community.

Sport is also necessary for communities as never before. Research has found that sport helps reduce violence, keeps Indigenous youth out of serious trouble and is essential to counter the moral despair of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Organisations such as the National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academy, an Aboriginal-governed, non-profit organisation, help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children achieve their sporting and academic goals and possibly become sports stars in their field.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Tel. (03) 9419 3000
- Melbourne Aboriginal Youth, Sport and Recreation Co-op Ltd Tel. (03) 9486 9123

Things to remember

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- There are many community benefits to bringing traditional Indigenous games back to life.