



**American Cancer Society Circle Of Life<sup>SM</sup>**  
*Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities*

## Wellness along the Cancer Journey: Coordinator's and Educator's Guide

Revised October 2016

### Chapter 2: Understanding the Burden of Cancer among American Indians and Alaska Natives



## *Circle Of Life: Cancer Education and Wellness*

### *for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities*

## **Understanding the Burden of Cancer among American Indians and Alaska Natives**

American Indians and Alaska Natives make up about 2% of the US population<sup>iii</sup>. There is great tribal and language diversity among the tribes<sup>iv</sup>. More than 566 tribes are recognized by the US government, and certain states acknowledge others<sup>v</sup>.

American Indians and Alaska Natives share a common history of oppression. This, along with displacement and cultural trauma, impacts health beliefs and actions. But they still have ties to a rich cultural heritage. This leads to a strong sense of community, family, and spirituality<sup>vi</sup>.

Native people are spread widely across the US. Some live on reservation lands, while others are in remote rural areas or urban settings. High-quality health care and information is a challenge when people are so far apart. This can lead to a greater burden of cancer and other illness among native peoples<sup>vi</sup>.

These highlights are from a 2008 publication that looked at the cancer burden among American Indian and Alaska Natives:

- The top five cancers found among American Indian and Alaska Native men are: prostate, lung, colorectal, kidney, and bladder cancers. Stomach replaced bladder cancer in the top five for Alaska and the Southwest<sup>iv</sup>.
- The top three cancers among American Indian and Alaska Native women are: breast, colorectal, and lung cancers. Depending on the geographic region, additional cancers in the top five include uterine, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, kidney, and ovarian cancers<sup>iv</sup>.
- Lung and colorectal cancer incidence rates for American Indian and Alaska Native peoples in the Northern Plains and Alaska – both men and women – were significantly higher than for white people (Wiggins 2008).
- From 1999 to 2004, rates of cancer of the gallbladder, liver, stomach, and kidney were higher in American Indian and Alaska Native people in Alaska, the Northern and Southern Plains, and the Southwest than for white people (Wiggins 2008).

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- Most American Indian and Alaska Native peoples are less likely to be screened for colorectal, breast, and cervical cancers<sup>1</sup>, which can lead to finding cancer later. This can mean poorer treatment outcomes with lower survival rates.

A 2014 supplement to the *American Journal of Public Health* examining rates of cancer deaths among American Indians and Alaska Natives found:

- Death rates from cancer were significantly higher for AIAN men and women than for white men and women in the Northern Plains, Alaska, and Southern Plains for all cancer combined.
- In the Pacific Northwest, deaths from all cancers combined were significantly higher for AIAN women.
- Deaths from all cancers combined were significantly lower for AIAN men and women than for white men and women in the East and Southwest.
- Nationally, death rates from gallbladder, stomach, liver, and kidney cancers were higher among AIAN persons when compared with whites.

To gain a better understanding of the burden of cancer in their tribe or community, people should seek local sources of information. This can mean talking with health care providers and elders, or working with local or state health department's data collection and surveillance systems.

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<sup>1</sup> (Steele, Cardinez et al. 2008)