

Circle Of LifeSM: Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities



American Cancer Society Circle Of LifeSM
Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

Wellness Along the Cancer Journey:
Cancer Types
Revised October 2015
Chapter 8: Other Cancers



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Other Cancers

Group Discussion		True	False	Not Sure
1.	American Indians and Alaska Natives have the same cancer risks as other groups.			
2.	American Indians and Alaska Natives are less likely to be screened for cancer.			
3.	Some tribes have higher rates of some cancers.			

American Indians and Alaska Natives make up about 2% of the US population. There is great tribal and language diversity among the more than 500 federally recognized tribes across the US.

American Indians and Alaska Natives share a common history of oppression. This, alone with displacement and cultural trauma, impacts health beliefs and behaviors. But American Indians and Alaska Natives have ties to a rich cultural heritage leading to a strong sense of community, family, and spirituality.

In addition to the tribal diversity, culture, and history, American Indian and Alaska Native people are spread across the US. Some live on reservation lands, others in remote rural areas or in urban settings. The widespread communities present challenges to providing high quality health care and information. This can lead to a greater burden of cancer and other diseases among native peoples.

The following highlights are from a 2008 publication exploring 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 (Espey, 2008).
- The top three cancers among American Indian and Alaska Native women are: breast, colorectal, and lung cancers. Depending on the geographic region, other cancers in the top five included uterine, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, kidney, and ovarian cancers (Espey, 2008).

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- 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 cancers of the gallbladder, liver, stomach, and kidney were higher in American Indian and Alaska Native people in Alaska, Northern and Southern Plains, and the Southwest than for white people (Wiggins, 2008).
- Most American Indian and Alaska Native peoples are less likely to be screened for colorectal, breast, and cervical cancers, which can lead to finding cancer later (Steele, et al., 2008). This can mean poorer treatment outcomes with lower survival rates.

There are also differences in the risk factors when comparing American Indian and Alaska Natives to whites:

- Fewer American Indians and Alaska Natives report having a regular health care provider and health care coverage (Steele, et al., 2008).
- There is often inadequate or no access to health care and cancer resources outside of Indian Health Service and Tribal or urban clinical settings (Steele, et al., 2008).
- American Indians and Alaska Natives tend to report their health status as poorer than whites and have higher rates of diabetes. Having diabetes can affect cancer risk and cancer treatment – and between 15%-25% of native cancer patients are diabetic.
- American Indians and Alaska Natives report lower rates of physical activity, higher rates of obesity, and more use of alcohol and commercial tobacco. The use of commercial tobacco ranged from 21% of natives in the Southwest to 40% of Alaska Natives, compared to only 22.8% of people using tobacco among whites at that time (Steele, et al., 2008).

The rates of different cancers vary depending on geographic region and tribal nation, as found in a special research study which only looked at people who were members of American Indian tribes:

- Prostate cancer among northern and southern plains tribes were comparable to African Americans and whites (Espey, 2008).

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- There were more stomach, kidney and gallbladder cancers found among southwestern tribal nations (Espey, 2008).
- There are more colorectal, breast and lung cancers found among Alaska people, northern plains and southern plains (Espey, 2008).

To gain a better understanding of the burden of cancer in your tribe or community, you should seek local sources of information. Talk with doctors, nurses, elders, and work with the local or state health department's data collection and surveillance systems.

Key Messages

- While lung, breast, prostate, colorectal, and cervical cancers are the most common cancers found in the US, other cancers may be more common among American Indians and Alaska Natives.
- These other cancer types include: gallbladder, mouth / throat, kidney, stomach, multiple myeloma, ovarian, uterine, testicular, and even some childhood cancers.
- Many of these cancers do not have defined risk factors or early detection tests, so see a health care provider for regular exams and any new problems.
- More information on these and other cancers can be found on the American Cancer Society Web site (www.cancer.org). Organizations such as the National Cancer Institute or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also have more about cancer.
- The best way to reduce cancer risk is a healthy lifestyle. Get to and maintain a healthy weight. Eat lots of vegetables and fruits and cut down on processed meats and red meats. Get regular physical activity. Limit alcohol intake. Avoid commercial tobacco products and second-hand smoke.