

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



**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:  
American Indian, Alaska Native and Complementary  
Healing**

Revised October 2015

**Chapter 2: American Indian and Alaska Native Healing**



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## **American Indian and Alaska Native Healing**

American Indian and Alaska Native healers may include herbalists, spiritual healers, and medicine men or medicine women. Many American Indians and Alaska Natives see their healers for spiritual reasons, such as to seek guidance, truth, balance, reassurance, and spiritual well-being. They may still use mainstream medicine to deal with “white man’s illness.” However, there is a belief that the spirit cannot be separated from healing.

There are more than 500 Native American tribal communities, with many differences between them. It is not surprising that healing rituals and beliefs vary a great deal. The most sacred traditions are still secret, passed along from one healer to the next. Because of these factors, information on healing practices is general and somewhat limited.

Because of some Native American tribes’ extensive knowledge of herbs, they are one of the best known forms of Native American healing. Herbal treatments can include teas, tinctures, and salves. One well known remedy for pain uses bark from a willow tree, which contains acetylsalicylic acid – now known as aspirin.

Purifying and cleansing the body is also an important practice used in some Native American healing rituals. Sweat lodges are special, darkened enclosures heated with stones from a fire. Special teas that induce vomiting may also be used by the healer for this purpose. Smudging is a practice that involves cleansing a place or person with the smoke of sacred plants. These methods can be used to bring about an altered mental state and greater awareness. They are done to help make a person more open to the healing techniques.

Another practice of Native American healing, symbolic healing rituals, can involve whole communities. These ceremonies can include chanting, singing, painting bodies, dancing, exorcisms, sand paintings, and even limited use of mind-altering substances. All this is done to promote healing of the sick. Such rituals can last for hours, days, or even weeks. These ceremonies are a way to ask for help from the spiritual dimension.

Prayer is also an essential part of Native American healing practices.

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### **The History of American Indian and Alaska Native Healing**

American Indian and Alaska Native healing methods have been used in North America for up to 40,000 years. These methods seem to have roots in common with other cultures, such as ancient Ayurvedic and Chinese traditions. They have also been influenced by the nature, plants, and animals where the Natives settled. Healing practices have evolved over time as the tribes moved and met with other tribes along trade routes. The tribes gathered many herbs from nearby lands, and sometimes traded them over long distances.

Many Native medicine practices were banned or illegal in parts of the United States for many decades. They were lost or driven underground until 1978, when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed. Now, there still are problems with ceremonies and rituals on some of the sacred sites. They are sometimes forbidden because the land is now used for something else. Despite this, American Indian and Alaska Native people still practice traditional healing.

### **Studies of American Indian and Alaska Native Healing**

Some people believe American Indian and Alaska Native medicine can help cure diseases, injuries, and mental health problems.

One clinical trial looked at 116 people with a number of ailments who were treated with traditional Native healing. They had problems such as infertility, chest and back pain, asthma, depression, diabetes, and cancer. After a seven- to 28-day intensive healing experience, more than 80% reported some benefit. Five years later, 50 of these people said they were cured of their diseases, while another 41 said they felt better. Another nine reported no change, five were worse, and two had died. This group was compared to people who were seen in an emergency room. The comparison group got mainstream treatments, but they also reported benefit. None of either group's reports were verified by health care providers, and outcomes were not compared to those expected for each illness. Because of these and other limitations of the study, one cannot draw conclusions about how well American Indian and Alaska Native ways work for physical healing. But as of 2015, this is the only published research study available that compares traditional Indian healing with mainstream Western medicine.

American Indian and Alaska Native healing have not been proven to cure diseases, but also have not been well studied. Still, people often report that they

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have less pain and stress and better quality of life. The communal and spiritual support this type of healing provides could have helpful effects. Prayer, meditation, and looking inward can be calming and can help to reduce stress.

Because American Indian and Alaska Native healing is based a lot on spirituality, it can be hard to study. And, it's not easy to find groups large enough to study because healing practices are not the same for all the different Nations, healers, and illnesses. Also, many American Indians and Alaska Natives do not want their practices studied. They believe sharing such information exploits their culture and weakens their power to heal. In the past, outside people have sometimes misinterpreted Native culture and beliefs. This may increase their concerns about letting others study the ways they practice healing.

The herbs used in healing often have not been tested to find out how they interact with other medicines, foods, or dietary supplements. A few reports of harmful effects from herbs, or herbs that change the effects of other drugs may be published. But full studies of interactions and effects of any one herb are rarely available. Any list of the ill effects and interactions of herbs should be considered incomplete.

Many American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices may be used to help relieve some cancer symptoms and side effects of cancer treatment. But, as most American Indian/Alaska Native healers already know, they should not be expected to cure the cancer.

People being treated for cancer and other serious health problems should talk to their health care providers if they plan on using herbs or certain rituals. Cleansing rituals may be especially harmful to people who are already dehydrated or weak.

### **Key Messages**

- American Indian and Alaska Native healing traditions have been in practice for up to 40,000 years in North America.
- It is important to let your health care provider know before starting traditional herbs or healing practices if a person is getting cancer treatment.
- American Indian and Alaska Native healing practices seek to restore balance and to restore a person to a healthy and spiritually whole state.

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