



CDHP *Fact Sheet*

Native American Child Oral Health

Native American Children Have More Oral Disease & Less Care than Their Peers

Native American Children Experience Oral Health Disparities

Right from the start, American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) children experience more cavities and less treatment than other US children. The odds of AI/AN *preschoolers* having tooth decay is 5 times greater than for US preschoolers generally and these children have 3 times more decayed teeth than their peers.

By third grade, almost all AI/AN children (91%) have experienced tooth decay and 72% have unfilled cavities. Among primary-school children, AI/AN children continue to experience higher disease rates; they have four times the number of untreated caries as their peers (46% versus 11%).

The cavity-disparity continues into and through the teen years – affecting the permanent teeth as well as the primary teeth. AI/AN teens have more than double the amount of permanent-tooth decay as their peers (68% compared to 24%).

And cavities aren't the only oral disparity: Three times more AI/AN children are born with cleft lips or cleft palates than other children (3.7 versus 1.2 children with clefts per 1,000 births). AI/AN teens and adults are also much more likely to have periodontal (gum) disease which often leads to tooth loss. In some American Indian tribes, both adolescent males and females commonly use spit tobacco. A study of Navajo adolescents showed 75% of males and 49% of females used spit tobacco. Of those who used spit tobacco, 26% had mucosal lesions related to oral cancer.

With this extreme level of disease burden, it comes as no surprise that American Indians are more likely to rate their oral health as "fair" or "poor" compared to whites and to report dissatisfaction with the appearance of their teeth.

AI/AN Children Have Less Dental Care and Less Dental Insurance

Fewer AI/AN children and adults see a dentist in a year than others. A national health survey showed that 29% of AI/AN children aged 2 to 17 had not seen a dentist in the past year compared to 21% of white, non-Latino children in the same age group. According to Healthy People 2010, 34% of AI/ANs had a preventive dental visit in 12 months compared to 44% of all persons.

While the Indian Health Service (IHS) provides comprehensive dental services and succeeds at providing larger proportions of AI/AN children with sealants than their non-Native peers, IHS lacks sufficient resources to meet the treatment needs of 1.8 million American Indians living on or near reservations. IHS currently employs 322 dentists and reports a vacancy rate of 24%. Barriers to accessing care also include lack of health insurance since American Indians are 2 to 3 times as likely to be uninsured as whites.

Disproportionately Few Dentists are American Indians or Alaska Natives

While AI/AN populations comprise about 1% of the US population, less than 1% of active dentists and less than 0.5% of dental students are AI/AN. A disproportionately high portion of patients treated by AI/AN dentists are themselves AI/AN (10.1% compared to less than 2% for non AI/AN dentists).

February 2005 by Anne DeBiasi MHA and Burton Edelstein DDS MPH

Sources: (1) USDHHS Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General, 2000; (2) IHS, Oral Health Survey of AI/AN Dental Patients 1999; (3) Key Facts: Race, Ethnicity and Medical Care, Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003; (4) Healthy People 2010; (5) IHS, Facts on Indian Health Disparities 2005; (6) IHS Workforce Report 2005; (7) National Conference of State Legislatures, Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Oral Health, 2004.