

Asthma in American Indian/Alaska Native Communities



Asthma is a chronic condition that affects breathing. Anyone can develop asthma, but American Indians/Alaska Natives appear to have a greater burden than others. Here's what to know—and what to do to manage asthma if you have it.

IS ASTHMA MORE COMMON IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES?

While information about asthma rates in tribal communities is limited, surveys suggest that asthma is more common in American Indian/Alaska Native people than in many other racial or ethnic groups. People in these communities are more likely to have asthma—and die from it—than white people. Those living in the Southwest region have the highest rate of asthma hospitalizations.

WHY IS THE ASTHMA BURDEN GREATER IN THESE COMMUNITIES?

The reasons vary and are complex, in part because of unique environmental factors in these communities. They include:

BY THE NUMBERS

American Indians/Alaska Natives are **20% more likely** to have asthma than white Americans.

American Indian/Alaska Native children are **2.5x more likely** to have asthma than white children.

Death rates for American Indians/Alaska Natives are **41% higher** than for white Americans.



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WHY IS THE ASTHMA BURDEN GREATER IN THESE COMMUNITIES? (continued)

COMMERCIAL TOBACCO SMOKE

American Indian/Alaska Native adults are more likely to smoke cigarettes than any other group in the U.S. Commercial tobacco smoke is unhealthy and contains thousands of chemicals. It is a common asthma trigger, including when inhaled as secondhand smoke.

HEALTHCARE ACCESS BARRIERS AND GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION

American Indians/Alaska Natives suffer both higher rates of chronic disease and shorter life expectancy compared to other U.S. racial and ethnic groups. Barriers to access and geographic isolation can prevent people from receiving the medical care they may need, which can make asthma harder to manage. Home visits by providers familiar with the culture are a proven way to help people learn to treat their asthma.

SMOKE FROM WOOD STOVES

Many tribal community members rely on wood-burning stoves to heat homes or cook food. Some burn coal in wood stoves for heat. Older wood stoves release more smoke than newer ones and can make asthma worse. Community health workers can work with families to help lower the impact of triggers such as these in the home.

WHAT CAN I DO TO BETTER MANAGE MY ASTHMA?

Here's where to start:

KNOW THE SYMPTOMS

Problems like coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, and shortness of breath are all signs of asthma.

TALK TO A HEALTHCARE PROVIDER

Together you can create an asthma action plan that works for you. This plan will help you:

- Think about the situations when your asthma seems worse. What seems to trigger your symptoms? Talk to a doctor about ways to try to avoid those situations.
- Understand what medications to take and when to take them. The plan should also explain what to do in an emergency.
- Learn to keep track of your symptoms between visits to know if your plan is working.

THE GOOD NEWS?

With the right treatment plan, most people with asthma can lead full and active lives.

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