

Aboriginal health issues

Aboriginal people have higher rates of ill health than any other group in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimates that there are between 418,800 and 476,900 indigenous people in Australia. Of all the States and Territories, Victoria has the lowest number of indigenous people, accounting for only 0.5 per cent of the population. Compared to Aboriginal people living in other parts of Australia, the Victorian Koori population reports the highest rates of recent illness (53.4%), chronic illness (46.3%) and cigarette smoking (57.1%). According to the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, some of the main health issues confronting Koori people include smoking, diet, diseases (such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and high blood pressure), stress, drugs, alcohol and poor children's health.

Children's health issues

The infant mortality rate among indigenous people is three times higher than the national average, or 15.2 deaths per 1,000 births compared to five per 1,000. Other major health concerns include:

- Newborns are more likely to be underweight.
- Around nine out of 10 children aged five years and under are constantly exposed to cigarette smoke in the home.
- Middle ear infections are common, which contributes to hearing problems and can cause speech or schooling difficulties.

Health problems by age group

Indigenous people are nearly twice as likely to be admitted to hospital than non-indigenous people. The main reasons for hospitalisation by age group for Koori people include:

- **15 years and under** - diseases of the chest and throat, injuries from accidents, middle ear infections.
- **Adult men** - injuries from accidents, diseases of the heart and chest, substance abuse, diseases of the digestive system.
- **Adult women** - pregnancy and birth, diseases of the urinary and reproductive systems, injuries sustained in accidents.

Contagious diseases

Aboriginal people have much higher rates of infection for many contagious and potentially life threatening diseases, including:

- Gonorrhoea
- *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib)
- HIV/AIDS
- Meningitis
- Salmonellosis
- Syphilis
- Tuberculosis.

Diet and nutrition

Traditional diets were rich in nutrients and low in fat. Modern urban diets tend to be high in fat and sugar, but low in nutrition. High fat, low fibre diets have been linked to a number of disorders including obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Causes of death

Indigenous people have a shorter life expectancy - around 18 to 19 years less than non-indigenous people. The average life span is 57 years for an Aboriginal male and 62 years for an Aboriginal female. The most common causes of death include:

- **Circulatory diseases** - including heart disease and stroke. The number of deaths caused by conditions such as coronary heart disease is double that of the non-indigenous population.
- **Diabetes** - and other diseases of the endocrine system. The rate of diabetes is six times higher among indigenous people. It is estimated that diabetes affects between 10 to 30 per cent of the Aboriginal population.
- **Injuries** - sustained in accidents such as car crashes. An indigenous person is three times more likely to die in an accident than a non-indigenous person. The Aboriginal population also has high rates of suicide and homicide.
- **Respiratory system diseases** - deaths from chronic disease are three to five times more common. Around half of the diseases are caused by infections. Respiratory infections are 10 times more common in the indigenous population.
- **Cancer** - particularly lung, cervical and liver cancer. According to the South Australian Cancer Registry, the death rate among the indigenous population is higher because the cancers are typically diagnosed at a later stage.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Co-op Ltd Tel. (03) 9419 3000

Things to remember

- Aboriginal people have higher rates of ill health than any other group in Australia.
- Major concerns include diet, children's health issues and the high rate of diseases such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.
- Indigenous people have a much shorter life span than non-indigenous people.

Want to know more?

Go to More information for support groups, related links and references.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Victorian Aboriginal Health Service

Copyright © 1999/2008 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.