



Exercising Native Traditions in Alaska

Public Health Problem

Inactivity and poor dietary habits are responsible for extremely high rates of overweight in Alaska and lead to many health problems, including high rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease. More than 63% of Alaskan adults are overweight or obese, according to the state's 2000 and 2001 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveys. More than 21% of Alaskan adults are not physically active, and more than 76% do not consume the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables a day. Weight problems are especially a problem during youth, a critical time when diet and activity behaviors and patterns begin to form. About 44% of southeast Alaskan young people are overweight compared with 10% of U.S. young people, according to the SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC).

Program Example

The Exercising Native Traditions program, funded by the Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant, inspires Alaska Native adolescents and adults in Juneau to adopt a more active lifestyle and make healthy eating choices. The four-part program encourages activities that are an integral part of the traditional native lifestyle. The program has involved 300 Alaska Native young people and adults in Native canoeing as a traditional way to be physically active during the summers. The program has also involved Alaska Native young people and adults in a variety of culturally oriented physical activities and offers an educational and media campaign, based on cultural traditions, to promote physical activity among Alaska Natives. The program is increasing the number of young people and adults who eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

Implications and Impact

The Exercising Native Traditions program is making a significant contribution to Alaska's efforts to increase physical activity and reduce overweight and obesity. SEARHC recently completed a survey to identify culturally appropriate physical activity preferences for targeted populations. Swimming and walking were identified as two top-preference activities. On the basis of the survey findings, SEARHC sponsored swimming pool sessions for 104 young people and adults, developed and sponsored native drumming and dance sessions for 27 young people and adults, and developed and conducted the Traditional Canoe Racing project. Elders have expressed how proud they are to see this traditional activity being revitalized. Moreover, during the 5 A Day media campaign, the program provided nutrition education and healthy snacks to 400 young people and 50 adults. Exercising Native Traditions is one of several programs that are helping the state achieve its *Healthy People 2010* goal of reaching at least 50% of the population with strong health promotion and health education programs by 2005.

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