

# American Indian and Alaska Native Cancer Fact Sheet

***This fact sheet is provided by the American Indian and Alaska Native Research Program at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research to provide some helpful information concerning cancer in our community.***

**Q: What is cancer?**

**A:** Cancer is a disease that begins if new cells, the body's basic building material, grow when the body does not need them to or when old cells do not die when they should. These "extra" cells build up and form a lump called a tumor. A tumor can grow if it is not treated. There are two types of tumors. One causes cancer (malignant tumor) and the other does not (benign tumor).

**Q: What American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) populations are more likely to be diagnosed with cancer?**

**A:** Cancer is continuing to increase among AIAN populations throughout the U.S. and Canada. Cancer is primarily a disease of people over the age of 40 and all individuals' risk for cancer increases as they grow older. People who are affiliated with Northern Plains tribal Nations or who are Alaska Native have more cancer than do people who are from the southwest. However, even people in the southwest are seeing more cancer. Many types of cancers do not have noticeable symptoms. This is one of several reasons why it is important to take part in regular cancer screening. People are at greatest risk for developing cancer if they use tobacco habitually, drink an average of 2 or more alcoholic drinks daily, do not get daily physical activity, or eat a lot of fast food or high fat foods.

**Q: How serious is cancer in the AIAN population?**

**A:** Cancer is the third leading cause of death for AIAN of all ages. It is the second leading cause of death among American Indians older than 45 years of age.

**Q: What types of cancer are common for AIAN?**

**A:** In general, the most common types of cancer for AIAN are cancer of the breast, colon and rectum, and lung. In eight of the nine Indian Health Service (IHS) Areas, lung cancer is the most common type of cancer death. In addition, 87% of all lung cancer deaths can be linked to tobacco smoking.

**Q: How can cancer be prevented?**

**A:** People can lower their chances of getting cancer by taking certain actions such as not smoking, choosing foods with less fat and eating more vegetables, fruits and whole grains. In addition, exercising regularly and avoiding obesity can help prevent cancer. People can also protect themselves by getting regular checkups to find cancer in its early stage. When identified early, cancer treatment is more effective. This is especially important for people with a family history of cancer.

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**FACTS FROM THE 2001  
CALIFORNIA HEALTH  
INTERVIEW SURVEY**

- *Nearly 10% of AIAN men and 15% of AIAN women in California, age 40 and over, report being diagnosed with some type of cancer.*
- *Approximately 5% of AIAN women in California, age 40 and over, report being diagnosed with breast cancer.*
- *Of AIAN women age 18 and over in California, 91% have had at least one Pap test, the procedure which checks for abnormal cells on the cervix, and 83% reported a Pap test within the past three years.*
- *More than 68% of AIAN women age 40 and over in California had a mammogram within the past two years. However, over 1 in 10 AIAN women 40 years and older, reported never having a mammogram.*
- *The 2001 California Health Interview Survey included 3,186 AIAN adults (1,408 men and 1,778 women). Of these AIAN adults, 1,659 were age 45 and older.*



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**Q: How is cancer treated?**

**A:** There are several treatment options for cancer including surgery to remove the tumor, and radiation therapy (burns the cancer cells) and chemotherapy (drugs to poison the cancer cells) to kill cancer cells. Other methods include therapy through drugs that stop the production of hormones or the removal of organs that produce hormones, microbiology (angiogenesis) to block continued growth of cancer cells, biological therapy which stimulates the immune system and help patients resist the side effects of cancer treatment, and other types of therapy.

**Q: Is cancer a death sentence?**

**A:** No, cancer treatments are getting better and better and many AIAN who get treatment while the cancer is in early stages of growth may have a normal life span. Cancer is gradually becoming a “chronic” disease, like diabetes, rather than a cause of death.

**Q: Where can I get more general facts about cancer?**

**A:** There are several Websites:

Intercultural Cancer Council: [www.iccnetwork.org/cancerfacts/cfs2.htm](http://www.iccnetwork.org/cancerfacts/cfs2.htm)

National Cancer Institute: [www.cancer.gov/](http://www.cancer.gov/)

Mayo Clinic Native C.I.R.C.L.E.: [www.mayo.edu/nativecircle/resources.html](http://www.mayo.edu/nativecircle/resources.html)

Native American Cancer Research (NACR): [www.NatAmCancer.org](http://www.NatAmCancer.org)

UCLA Center for Health Policy Research: [www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu](http://www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu)

**Q: Where can I get support if I am a cancer patient or am a loved one of a cancer patient?**

**A:** Native American Cancer Research and the “*National Native American Cancer Survivors’ Support Network*” provide culturally specific information and support. Toll-Free Telephone: (800) 537-8295.

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