



Nutrition & Health on Native American Reservations



A well-balanced diet including fresh fruits and vegetables is a privilege for many Native Americans, especially those living in geographically isolated areas. Regular access to fresh food that is sufficient in quality, variety and desirability of dietary intake – or food security – is an issue on at least 60 reservations in the U.S., and as a result nutrition-related diseases run high for Native Americans.



Food insecurity is defined by [Feeding America](#) as “a federal measure of a household’s ability to provide enough food for every person in the household to have an active, healthy life.” Thus, food insecurity is one way to measure the risk of hunger.

The condition of food insecurity is common in areas that are designated by the USDA as food deserts, or “parts of the country void of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole food, usually found in impoverished areas.” These food deserts offer more convenience stores and fast-food restaurants than the supermarkets and grocery stores more typical of mainstream America.

Nutrition-Related Health Consequences

Being food insecure, and living in a food desert, have devastating health consequences that are at the root of nutrition-related illnesses plaguing Indian Country, including higher levels of obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

Native Americans suffer from the highest prevalence of diabetes in the country, and the [mortality rate of diabetes](#) among Native Americans is three times higher than that of all other races in the country, according to the federally operated Indian Health Service (IHS).

The issue of childhood obesity has been a growing concern for a few decades that in recent years gained increased public attention due in part to Michelle Obama's [Let's Move!](#) initiatives. The month of September has been declared [National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month](#) to raise awareness about the high prevalence of obesity and resulting medical issues, and a recent study by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found these startling statistics:

- Nearly 49 percent of American Indian school children are overweight or obese – almost double the rate of white school children.
- Obese children are more likely to suffer from serious, lifelong illnesses like Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and asthma than their normal weight peers.
- Obesity is a common symptom that stems from food insecurity – which affects 1 in 4 American Indians – and, in turn, food insecurity is a symptom that stems from poverty.
- With the rise in obesity rates, the number of American Indian teens with diabetes has dramatically increased. Between 1994-2004 diabetes cases rose 68 percent among Native youth ages 15-19.



While [heart disease](#) and cancer are leading causes of death for many races, there are some striking disparities between American Indians/Alaskan Natives and their Caucasian counterparts in the U.S. The Office of Minority Health (Health and Human Services) reports that Natives have higher rates of several risk factors that can lead to heart disease, including two that are nutrition-related:

- [Obesity](#) is 60 percent more likely for Native/Alaska Native adults than non-Hispanic Whites.
- High blood pressure is 30 percent more likely for Native/Alaska Native adults than Whites.
- Smoking is 20 percent more likely for Native American men than White men.

Health disparities for Native Americans are exacerbated by a lack of primary or preventative health care on many reservations. Although the IHS provides health care to federally recognized tribes, a shrinking federal budget has IHS focusing primarily on emergency care.

What's Working?

[Partnership With Native Americans](#) (PWNA) combats food insecurity through immediate relief and long-term solutions that support healthier communities. The Native-serving nonprofit is committed to addressing nutrition and the associated health impacts across the more than 300 reservation communities it serves throughout 12 states.

Staple Foods

Supplying monthly deliveries of staple foods to Elderly Nutrition Centers and Senior Centers, through its [Northern Plains Reservation Aid](#) (NPRA), [Native American Aid](#) (NAA) and [Sioux Nation Relief Fund](#) (SNRF) programs, is one way PWNA helps reservation programs address food insecurity and diet-related illnesses.

Providing [standard food](#) packages year after year helps nutrition programs on the reservations combat tight budgets and feed their elderly participants more nutritious meals. One food partner on the Pine Ridge Reservation reported that missing a couple PWNA food deliveries had an impact: "I had to catch up with my reports to PWNA because we need the extra food items they provide." Nutritious food and regular meals are especially important for the seniors and those with diabetes.



Breakfast in a Bag

Another service, [Breakfast-in-a-Bag](#), provides breakfast foods for Elders of the Rosebud Reservation nine months out of the year. Many Elders often struggle to obtain enough food as month-end approaches and their social security funds have been exhausted. Once a month, Elders can use Breakfast-in-a-Bag vouchers at the tribal grocery store to choose healthy foods eligible under the Breakfast-in-a-Bag service. The store posts signs indicating the products available, which typically include items such as eggs, sausage, bread, cereal, milk and fruit.

For 82-year-old Rose from the Upper Cut Meat community on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, the Breakfast-in-a-Bag service is critical for her budget and overall wellbeing. She shared, "I used to be diabetic—I don't know what I'm eating, but it stopped," raising the possibility that the breakfast service may have played a part in improving her health.

PWNA's efforts to supply food boxes to food pantries, along with staple foods to elderly nutrition centers and soup kitchens, breakfast supplies and fresh produce for Native Elders, and more have helped reservation partners meet immediate needs and reduce food insecurity in their communities.

You Are Invited

PWNA invites you to join us in our commitment to decrease food insecurity and support healthy Native communities. Even the smallest monetary gift from you – or a bulk, in-kind donation of staple foods or fresh fruits and vegetables – can help fuel the nutrition of these communities. Learn more about what you can do at www.npraprogram.org/, www.naaprograms.org/ and www.snrfprograms.org/.



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