

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Tribal Environmental Health Education Program

This project is designed to raise awareness and improve tribal clinicians' knowledge, skills, and access to resources to identify, prevent, and respond to health issues related to environmental contaminants. Currently, programs of this nature for tribal clinicians are lacking.



Office of
Tribal Affairs

and

Division of Health
Education and
Promotion

Why Is the Training Needed?

Tribal populations' lifestyle, cultural, ceremonial, and religious practices are intertwined with the environment. This can result in environmental exposure scenarios that are unique to individual tribes and very different from other populations.

Health and environmental personnel who work within tribal communities generally receive little, if any, training related to environmental health. But this training is quite important. Diseases related to environmental exposures are difficult to recognize — they often manifest common, nonspecific symptoms. Establishing a link between environmental exposure and illness means learning to take a careful and thorough exposure history. Asking the right questions related to exposure will enable clinicians to make more accurate diagnoses, recommend appropriate treatment, and prevent further exposure. In addition to learning to take an exposure history, it is equally important to acquire the knowledge and

skills necessary to communicate environmental exposure information.

What Are the Goals of the Training?

The purpose of the training is to make participants more aware of environmental health issues in tribal communities. It will provide participants with the necessary skills to identify, prevent, and respond to health issues related to environmental contaminants. Other related goals include:

- Improving the capacity of tribal communities to prevent and respond to illnesses related to environmental exposures.
- Raising awareness about data collection to address environmental health effects.
- Developing activities that promote environmental health. These include health intervention projects, health provider education, and environmental health education to affected communities.



What Topics Are Covered?

The training focuses on a number of important concepts related to environmental exposures. These include:

- **Exposure Assessment.** The assessment involves understanding environmental conditions and the ways in which contamination could reach community members. We review key components of the exposure assessment process.
- **Contaminants of Concern.** For any contaminant of interest, you should understand how dose, duration, overall exposure, and pre-existing health conditions influence the type and likelihood of harmful effects. The training program adapts to highlight environmental contaminants specific to individual communities or tribes. These may include: cadmium, lead, mercury, mold, PCBs, and pesticides.
- **Emergency Preparedness.** A tribe's response capabilities will help minimize exposure and harm in the event of a chemical, biological, or radiological emergency (accident or terrorist attack). We highlight key considerations for tribal clinicians.
- **Exposure History.** Learning how to take a comprehensive exposure history will allow you to assess the relationship between individual exposures to environmental hazards and possible health effects. We discuss techniques and tools used in taking exposure histories.
- **Risk Communication.** We review basic skills to help you effectively communicate information about health and the environment to the community.
- **Working with Tribal Communities.** In order to build trusting relationships and effective education programs, you need to understand special characteristics, concerns, and beliefs of the community. We discuss the importance of each.

The training includes a case scenario and exercises to illustrate these concepts.

How Did ATSDR Develop this Program?

ATSDR's Office of Tribal Affairs and Division of Health Education and Promotion designed this program with the specific needs of tribal communities in mind. ATSDR presented the program concept at several conferences and meetings in 2002 to obtain feedback on the needs of tribal communities with respect to environmental health education and to assure that tribes were included in the development process. ATSDR also assessed Indian Health Service representatives to identify the training needs of health care and environmental staff who work within tribal communities.

For More Information

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ATSDR plans to offer this program over time in a variety of settings. It will be designed for tribal clinicians, including physicians, nurses, community health representatives, environmental personnel, and any other individuals within the tribal community who provide direct health care. Because the training is community-based, we will also open the training to others interested in attending.

