

Dancing and Drumming: The Native American Quest for Healthy Weight

Generations ago, Native Americans and Alaska Natives did not have to deal with overweight and obesity and there wasn't much heart disease or diabetes. Why? The past 20 years have brought big changes in diet and physical activity for *all* Americans, including Native Americans and Alaska Natives. Overweight is the result of a complex mix of genetics, lifestyle, and environmental factors.

Traditionally, native peoples hunted and gathered their food. They chopped wood and hauled water. They played traditional games, drummed and danced more often. Today, they are less physically active, and are spending more time than ever in front of the computer or TV.

Traditional healthy foods like salmon, deer, turkey, beans, squash and fruit have been replaced by fast food, and with recipes that are higher in fat and calories. At the same time, portion sizes have tripled. All this could be adding to increases in weight and waistlines.

Extra weight strains your body and increases your risk of serious illnesses such as type 2 diabetes. The Indian Health Service reports that Native Americans and Alaska Natives have the highest rates of type 2 diabetes in the United States.¹ Native children are experiencing high rates of overweight and obesity as well.

Luckily, families can make small, gradual changes that can lead to a healthy weight for the whole family. See the bulleted list of Healthy Lifestyle Tips from the National Institutes of Health's **We Can!**TM (Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition) program. **We Can!** gives parents, and others who care for children ages 8 to 13, easy-to-use, science-based tools and guidelines to make better food choices, increase physical activity and reduce screen time.

HEALTHY LIFESTYLE TIPS

Eat right:

- Cut back on added fats and/or oils in cooking or spreads
- Watch portion sizes and avoid soda, which is high in sugar
- Buy and try a new fruit or vegetable

Be active:

- After dinner, play fun traditional games with your family
- Work up a sweat by practicing traditional dance and drumming, or going for a long, brisk walk
- Take the stairs instead of the escalator or elevator

Limit screen time:

- Set a daily, two-hour, non-school- or work-related screen time limit
- Don't put a TV or computer in your child's bedroom
- Make screen time active time by stretching, doing yoga, lifting weights or using your Wii exercise and dance programs

FOR MORE *We Can!* TIPS VISIT:
<http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov>

Native American Children

Age Group	Overweight or Obese	Obese
2 – 5 years	45 percent	24 percent
6 – 11 years	49 percent	31 percent
12 – 19 years	51 percent	30 percent

Source: Indian Health Service, FY 2007 Clinical Reporting System (CRS) BMI

Recognizing **We Can!**'s potential benefits, five tribal communities—the Cheyenne-Arapaho and Otoe-Missouria (OK), the Mohegan (CT), the Paiute Indian (UT) and the Washoe (NV)—have registered as **We Can!** community sites. The most recent tribe to join is the Cherokee Nation (OK).

Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chad Smith proclaimed that his tribe would “strengthen its efforts to create a healthier community through **We Can!** training and resources, including evidence-based obesity prevention programs for parents, caregivers and youth, in collaboration with community-based partners.”

But it's not just the Cherokee and the other tribes who have access to tips and tools they can use to help their members fight this growing challenge—**you do, too.**

Visit <http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov> or call 866-35-WECAN for details. If you belong to a tribe that has already joined the program, contact them directly to see how **you** can help make a healthier tomorrow for yourself, and your children, today.