

Change Language:

Barriers to oral health in Native American populations

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An ambulance bounces along on a rugged dirt road in rural Arizona. A call for severe pain dispatched the tribal emergency vehicle that serves an area of 1,600 square miles of the Navajo reservation. After a 20- or 30-minute drive, EMTs Josh Stago and his partner arrive to help a patient with unbearable tooth pain.

A “simple” trip to the dentist is not so simple for many Native Americans living on reservations miles away from dental or medical services, often with limited transportation.

“Sometimes a patient just doesn’t know what to do,” says Stago, who works for Indian Health Services.

Few oral health problems land a patient in an ambulance. But the barriers to care that the American Indian and Alaskan Native population face add to a greater oral health disparity than for any other minority group. This applies to those who live on reservations and those who live in more urban locales.

Difficulties with oral health start at an early age. According to the Center for Native Oral Health Research, young American Indian and Alaskan Native children are three times more likely to have untreated tooth decay than other U.S. children. A staggering 91 percent of children have had experience with decay by the time their first day of third grade rolls around, at just 8 years old.

Even when these children graduate elementary school, their oral health issues persist. The Indian Health Services reports that teens in this population experience more than double the amount of decay in their permanent dentition compared with their U.S. peers. American Indian and Alaskan Native adults also experience higher rates of periodontal disease than other populations, leading to the idea that tooth loss is an inevitable part of old age.

Answers to why the Native American population has poor oral health are multifaceted. One factor may be the below-average socioeconomic status of these populations. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 26 percent of American Indian and Alaskan Native people fall below the poverty line compared with 12 percent of the general U.S. population. Tobacco use is prevalent among American Indian and Alaskan Native populations, even among the very young. Traditional diets of meat and plant products have given way to diets higher in fat and sugar.

The physical barriers to care play a large role oral health disparities. Data from the U.S. Census show that about 40 percent of the 5.2 million Native Americans in the United States live on reservations or villages with scarce medical services. The dental clinic at the Indian Health Service Center in Winslow, Ariz., employs seven dentists for a population of 16,000 people. This is the main clinic serving a geographical area almost the size of Delaware. This is why it can sometimes 30 minutes for an ambulance to take half to reach someone in need, or for people to forgo preventive treatment. The situation at most reservations is similar to this one. New Mexico, South Dakota and Oklahoma are just some of the other states with reservations and people in need of dental care.

There are hundreds of Native American tribes, each with their own vibrant traditions, culture, heritage and way of life. There are many great opportunities and excellent benefits available for those interested in working for Indian Health Services and making a difference in the lives of this diverse patient population.

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