

MAKE SMOKING HISTORY[®]

Tobacco and Indigenous people

In Australia there are two Indigenous populations; Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. Indigenous people represent 3%¹ of the Western Australian population, with about 44.2% of Indigenous adults being current daily smokers.² Smoking causes serious health problems for all smokers. However the higher prevalence of smoking among Indigenous people contributes significantly to their higher rates of hospitalisation and death from diseases caused by tobacco.³ Among Indigenous Australians, tobacco use is responsible for 12% of the overall disease burden and 20% of deaths.⁴

What do Indigenous people know and think about smoking?

Research suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples understand that smoking causes health problems,^{3,5} but smoking is often given less priority compared to other health and social issues that have more immediate impacts.³ Being aware of health effects does not necessarily lead to quitting attempts,³ although many people do want to quit and have attempted to do so.⁶ It is important to remember that over 50% of Indigenous people in Western Australia have never smoked or no longer smoke, showing that Indigenous people can avoid smoking and can successfully quit.

Why do Indigenous people smoke?

Indigenous people smoke for the same reasons as other Australians, such as stress, boredom, enjoyment and addiction.³ There are also differences due to historical, social, cultural and economic factors, some of which are listed below:

- Colonisation and dispossession are thought to contribute to higher rates of tobacco use. Tobacco use among Indigenous Australians was initiated and reinforced through tobacco rations provided by early settlers. It was not until the late 1960s that paying Indigenous workers in tobacco was stopped completely.⁶
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations are more likely to live in disadvantaged circumstances with lower levels of income, education and employment and with poor housing conditions: factors all associated with higher levels of smoking.⁶
- The importance placed on sharing within Indigenous culture can make it difficult to be a non-smoker or quit.⁶
- Indigenous children and teenagers take up smoking earlier than non-Indigenous Australians, which is more likely to lead to addiction in adult life.⁶

Why do some Indigenous people never start?

Western Australian research completed in 2001 found some Indigenous people had never started smoking because no one in their family had smoked, their parents were strict and discouraged them from smoking, or they thought tobacco was a waste of money or felt confident about refusing cigarettes.⁷

Reasons for quitting?

The same Western Australian research also found that Indigenous people who had quit smoking did so to improve their health and fitness, to save money, to be a good role model to their children, and because increased restrictions around where people can smoke caused stress over when and where they could have their next cigarette.⁷

Barriers to quitting?

Indigenous smokers can face a number of barriers when trying to quit, including:

- Addiction to nicotine and the feeling that tobacco has become a part of them.³
- Being around other smokers (which is more common due to the higher rates of smoking amongst Indigenous peoples) and/or lack of social pressure to quit.⁸

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- Sharing of cigarettes amongst family and friends and difficulty in saying no for fear of offending.⁸
- Coping with the stress of daily living, and withdrawal from smoking cigarettes.³

What is being done to reduce smoking among Indigenous people?

Reducing Indigenous smoking and tobacco-related harm is a major priority in Western Australia and nationally. There are some excellent programs and projects being undertaken by organisations within our State. At a national level, an important public campaign called 'Close the Gap' was launched in 2007 by Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations calling for an end to Indigenous disadvantage.⁹ All levels of Australian government are now focussed on closing the gap and efforts to achieve this are supported by significant financial commitments.¹⁰ Both the National Preventative Health Strategy¹¹ and the Federal Government's response to the Strategy¹² prioritise measures to improve Indigenous health, with reductions in smoking an important focus. There is optimism about what might be achieved in the coming years.

Useful sites

To find out more information about Indigenous smoking, visit some of the following sites:

- **Tobacco In Australia:** A comprehensive resource on the history and use of tobacco in Australia with a chapter dedicated to Indigenous tobacco use. Visit: <http://www.tobaccoaustralia.org.au/>.
- **Centre for Excellence in Indigenous Tobacco Control (CEITC):** CEITC has developed a great resource kit for health workers called 'Talkin' Up Good Air'. See: <http://www.ceitc.org.au/talkinupgoodair>.
- **Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA):** AHCWA runs a project called 'Beyond the Big Smoke' which aims to promote smoke free policies and provide support for smoking cessation through Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services across WA. Visit: http://www.ahcwa.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=44&Itemid=7.
- **Department of Health and Ageing:** The Department of Health and Ageing's website provides summary information on the Federal Government's initiatives to reduce smoking among Indigenous populations. See: <http://www.health.gov.au/tackling-chronic-disease>.

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¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2006 Census quickstats: Western Australia [Internet]. 2007 [cited 2010 June 22]. Available from: <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au>.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2008. Canberra: ABS; 2010. ABS publication 4714.0.

³ Lindorff K. Tobacco time for action - national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tobacco control project final report. Canberra: National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO); 2002.

⁴ Vos T, Barker B, Stanley L, Lopez AD. The burden of disease and injury in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 2003. Brisbane: School of Population Health, The University of Queensland; 2007.

⁵ Boyle T, Shepherd CC, Pearson G, Monteiro H, McAullay D, Economo K, Stewart S. Awareness and impact of the 'Bubblewrap' advertising campaign among Aboriginal smokers in Western Australia. Tobacco Control. 2010; 19 (1): 83-86.

⁶ Winstanley M, White V. Chapter 8: tobacco use among Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. In Scollo M and Winstanley M, editors. Tobacco in Australia: facts and issues. [Internet]. 2008 [cited 2010 June 22]. Available from: <http://www.tobaccoaustralia.org.au/chapter-8-apsi>.

⁷ Wood L. Say No to Smokes Project: key findings on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander smoking (qualitative research). Perth: ACOSH; 2001. Unpublished summary sheet.

⁸ Centre for Excellence in Indigenous Tobacco Control. Barriers to giving up smoking. [Internet]. c2010 [cited 2010 January 6]. Available from http://www.ceitc.org.au/barriers_to_giving_up_smoking.

⁹ Close The Gap Coalition. Close The Gap: together we can end the Indigenous health crisis [Internet]. No date [cited 2010 June 23]. Available from: <http://www.closesthegap.com.au/information.php>.

¹⁰ Thomas D. Smoking prevalence trends in Indigenous Australians 1994-2004: a typical rather than an exceptional epidemic. International Journal for Equity in Health. 2009; 8 (37): 1-7.

¹¹ National Preventative Health Taskforce. Australia: the healthiest country by 2020 - National Preventative Health Strategy - overview [Internet]. 2009 [cited 2009 November 13]. Available from: <http://www.preventativehealth.org.au/internet/preventativehealth/publishing.nsf/Content/national-preventative-health-strategy-1p>.

¹² Australian Government. Taking preventative action - a response to Australia: the healthiest country by 2020 - The report of the National Preventative Health Taskforce [Internet]. 2010 [cited 2010 June 16]. Available from: <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/preventativehealth/publishing.nsf/Content/taking-preventative-action>.