

# Hot Topics in Alaska Native Health



**Yagheli Ch'tsizlan**

*We Are Getting Healthier*

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The Alaska Native Epidemiology Center Mission  
*Using Health Data to Promote Wellness*

The Alaska Native Epidemiology Center is a program  
within the Division of Community Health Services for the  
Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium

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joint efforts of the Alaska Native Epidemiology Center and a  
grant from the United States Department of Health and  
Human Services, Office of Minority Health.



## Welcome

In the Dena'ina Athabascan language Yagheli Ch'tsizlan means "we are getting healthier," and in many important ways this is true. Although we face many challenges, the Alaska Native community has made great strides in health over the years. In this booklet we are highlighting some key Alaska Native health concerns. Addressing these concerns is an important step on the path towards getting healthier.

Alaska Native people have long known that everything is connected. This is reflected in our culture and in this booklet by the use of our traditional values, our languages, and our symbols.

One Yupik symbol used throughout this booklet is the ellanguaq, or "eye of awareness" which represents the development of human awareness. The symbol with just the center represents an infant who is only aware of him or herself. The symbol with the center and a second ring represents a child who is more aware, and additional rings represent further development of a human's awareness. In this booklet we take a look at health at all levels.

Gunalchéesh "Thank you",

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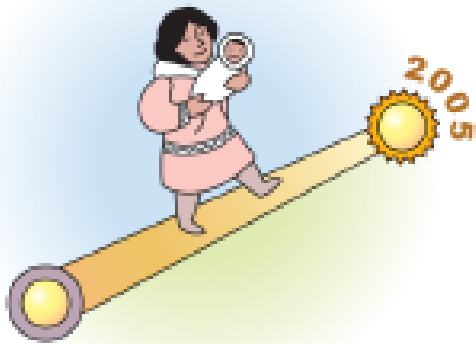


## Our challenge...

A birth defect can affect how a baby looks, acts or both.

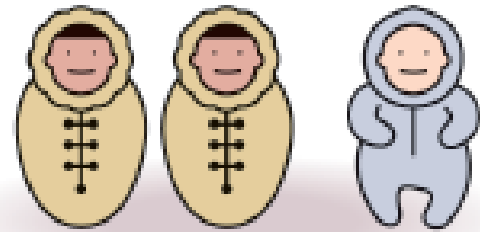
## What's going right?

Breastfeeding has kept our people strong since the beginning of time.<sup>(1)</sup>



**In 2005, 90% of Alaska Native women chose to breastfeed their babies at birth. More mothers are breastfeeding now than 10 years ago.<sup>(2)</sup> We need to keep this tradition strong!**

**Did you know?** To offer babies the most benefit, it's best to breastfeed throughout the first year of life.<sup>(4)</sup>



**More Alaska Native infants are born with birth defects than Alaska whites (1996-2002).<sup>(3)</sup>**

**Did you know?** While we don't know the cause of many types of birth defects, babies of women who smoke, chew, or use alcohol are at higher risk.<sup>(4)</sup>

## Infants are a precious blessing



irniaq  
Yup'ik

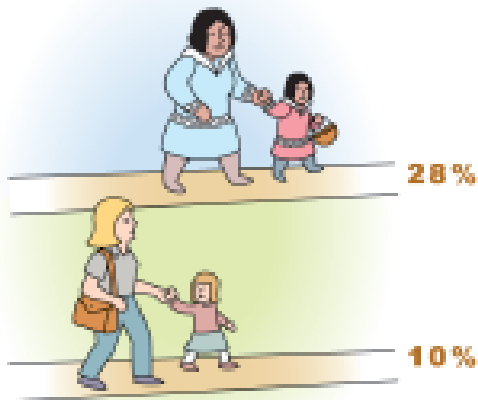
# Young Children

Q'udi ghezelen  
Athabascan

**Our children depend  
on us to show them  
the ways of living**

## What's going right?

Exercise not only builds strong bones  
and muscles, it gives us more energy.



**The number of Alaska Native mothers who  
report exercising everyday is almost three  
times higher than non-Native mothers. (2004)**

**Way to be! <sup>(5)</sup>**

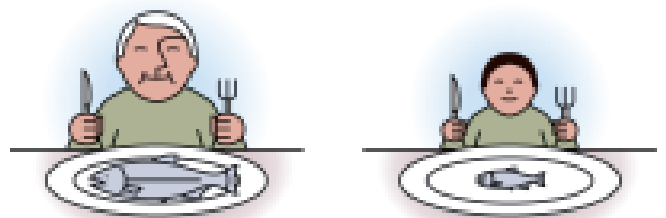
***Give traditional foods to your kids when  
they are small. They will have a taste for  
our foods the rest of their life!***

—Anonymous Elder

## Our challenge...

Putting on extra weight as a child makes it harder to  
maintain a healthy weight when we are older and also  
puts us at risk for type 2 diabetes and other serious  
diseases. <sup>(6,7)</sup>

Our young children are two times more likely to be  
overweight than children living in the rest of the  
country (2002). <sup>(8)</sup>



**Alaska Native and American Indian children  
are eating more western types of foods and  
less traditional foods than our elders. <sup>(9)</sup>**

**Did you know?** Alaska Native traditional foods like  
salmon and berries have many nutrients and are good  
for our health. Plus, we get exercise when we harvest  
them! <sup>(10)</sup>

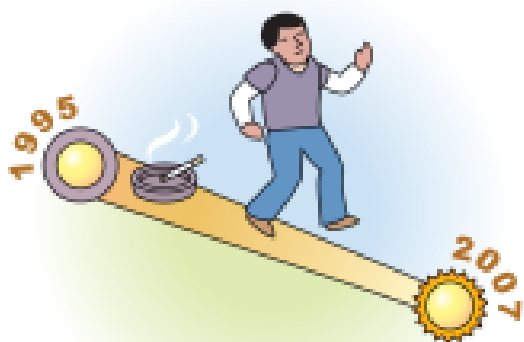
Ayaqyuaq  
Yup'ik

# Teens and Young Adults

yées wáat  
Tlingit

The next generation of leaders

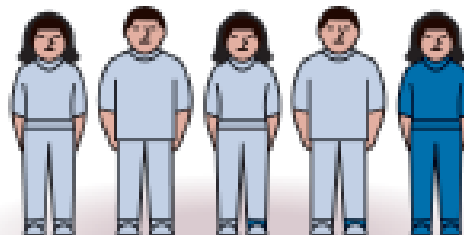
## What's going right?



The number of Alaska Native teens who smoke has gone down 30% since 1995.  
Way to be! <sup>(11)</sup>

## Our challenge...

Suicide is the leading cause of death for Alaska Native teens age 15 to 24.<sup>(12)</sup>



One in five of our teens has attempted suicide (2007). In fact, Alaska Native teens are close to three times more likely to attempt suicide compared to Alaska white teens. <sup>(13)</sup>



**Did you know?** Finding strength in our past can help us develop a strong sense of identity as we become adults. Studies show that kids who identify more with traditional ways of life report greater happiness and use fewer drugs and alcohol to cope with stress. <sup>(14)</sup>

### **Risk factors for suicide:**

- Problems with school or the law
- Depression
- Lack of self-esteem
- Stressful family life
- Breakup of a romance
- Unexpected pregnancy
- Loss of security
- Stress due to new situations
- Failing in school
- Loss of a loved one
- Sexual orientation and/or identity issues <sup>(15)</sup>

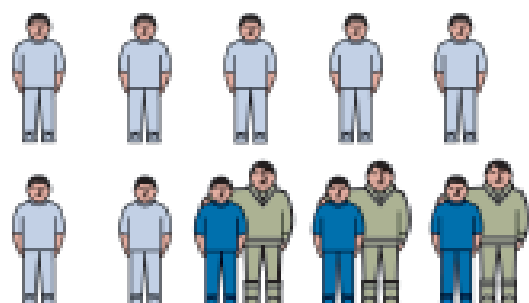
### **Warning signs:**

- Abrupt changes in personality
- Giving away possessions
- Use of drugs or alcohol
- Previous suicide attempt
- Withdrawal from people
- Change in eating and sleeping patterns
- Chronic Pain
- Restlessness <sup>(15)</sup>

**What can we do?** Spend time listening to our teens and provide opportunities for them to become more involved with traditional activities such as:

- Native Youth Olympics
- Traditional dancing
- Harvesting and eating traditional foods
- Storytelling
- Community involvement

It's as simple as talking with them about what they did at school...to show them we care.



**Only three out of 10 Alaska Native teens report that one of their parents talked to them about what they were doing at school as compared to more than half of Alaska white teens. <sup>(13)</sup>**



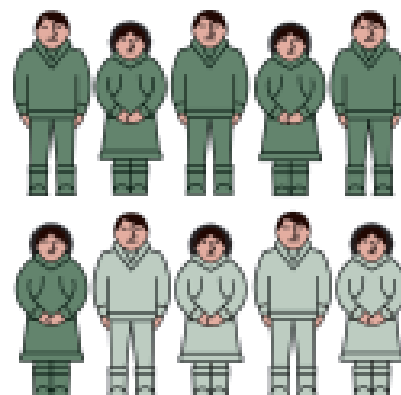
yanwáat  
Tlingit

Adults

taqneq  
Yupik

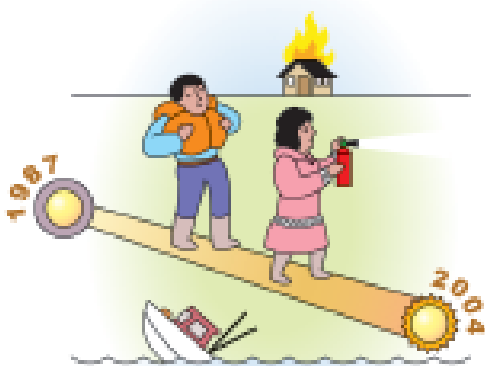
## Caregivers of our future

### Our challenge...



### What's going right?

In the past 20 years the number of Alaska Native people who have died from an unintentional injury has dropped dramatically.<sup>(12)</sup>



**In fact, there has been a 68% decrease in the number of Alaska Native people who have drowned, and a 71% decrease in the number of people who have died in a fire.**

**Way to be!** <sup>(12)</sup>

**Alcohol is associated with more than 4 of every 10 serious injuries that require hospitalization of Alaska Native people.**

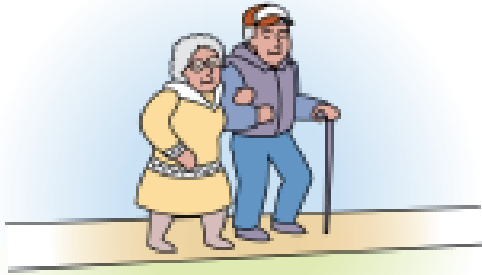
(2001-2005).<sup>(16)</sup>

**Did you know?** Alcohol is the number one substance abused in Alaska and is the leading cause of violent, suicidal, and accidental deaths, especially in our rural areas.<sup>(17)</sup>



## What's going right?

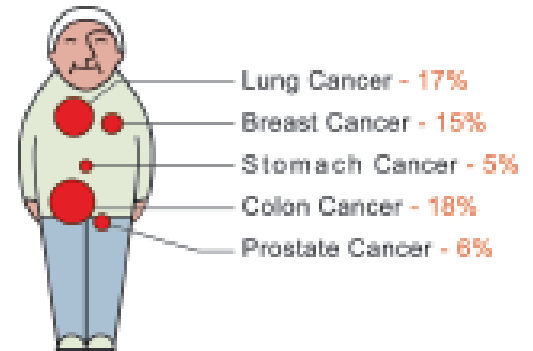
Alaska Native adults are more likely to meet recommendations for moderate to vigorous physical activity compared to Alaska's non-Native population.<sup>(18)</sup>



**In some areas, such as the Bristol Bay region, more than two out of every three Alaska Native people engage in regular physical activity. Way to be!** <sup>(18)</sup>

## Our challenge...

Colon cancer is the type of cancer Alaska Native people get most often. Unfortunately, Alaska Native people are more than two times as likely to be diagnosed with colorectal cancer than U.S. whites.<sup>(19)</sup>



**Leading Cancers for Alaska Natives (1989-2003)**

**Did you know?** Cancer that is found in the colon or rectum is called colorectal cancer. This type of cancer can often be prevented or detected early through regular colorectal cancer screenings.<sup>(19)</sup>

### What can we do?

- If you are over the age of 50, get screened for colon cancer regularly.
- If you have a family member who has had colorectal cancer, talk to your health care provider about what age you should begin screening.
- Eat a healthy diet and get plenty of exercise.
- Stop tobacco use.<sup>(20,21)</sup>

## Our most respected wisdom bearers

shaan  
Tlingit

Q'edna  
Athabascan

# Elders

The background of the page features a faded, light blue image of several people, likely Alaska Natives, wearing traditional clothing such as parkas and beaded jewelry. They are arranged in a group, some facing forward and others in profile. The overall tone is serene and cultural.

## For More Information

To find out more about any of the health topics covered in this booklet, please contact your local or regional health care provider. You can also contact any of the organizations listed below.

**Alaska Native Medical Center**

1-907-563-2662  
<http://www.anmc.org/>

**La Leche League** (breastfeeding)

1-877-452-5324  
<http://www.llli.org/>

**Alaska Tobacco Quit Line**

1-888-842-7848  
<http://www.alaskatca.org/quitline.htm>

**National Suicide Crisis Help Line**

1-800-SUICIDE (800-784-2433)  
<http://www.hopeline.com/>

**Alaska Alcoholics Anonymous**

1-907-272-2312  
<http://www.aa.org/>

**Centers for Disease Control**

1-800-CDC-INFO  
<http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/>

# Shesh t'qe\ani

*Have good health. Live a long time. Have good luck.*

## Acknowledgements:

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Knik Tribal Council

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## **Vision**

Alaska Natives are the healthiest  
people in the world

## **Mission**

Providing the highest quality health  
services in partnership with our people and the  
Alaska Tribal Health System

## **Values**

Achieving excellence  
Native self-determination  
Treat with respect and integrity  
Health and wellness  
Compassion



**ALASKA NATIVE TRIBAL HEALTH CONSORTIUM**  
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