



# American Indian and Alaska Native Girls

*This information sheet is designed to raise awareness of disordered eating and eating disorders among American Indian and Alaska Native girls. It highlights findings from recent studies and provides suggestions for promoting positive body image and healthy eating behaviors among middle school American Indian and Alaska Native students.*

## **American Indian girls are at risk**

Many people believe that only White girls are affected by eating disorders. In reality, no ethnic or socio-economic group is immune to the dangers of this disease. Cases of eating disorders among diverse racial and ethnic groups, including American Indians and Alaska Natives, are often underreported because studies typically do not include ethnically diverse populations.

Studies indicate that American Indian and Alaska Native adolescents are increasingly exhibiting disturbed eating behaviors and using unhealthy practices to control their weight. Disordered eating has been shown to occur more often among this group than among White, Hispanic, African American, or Asian girls.<sup>1</sup>

In a large study involving 545 Hispanic, American Indian, and White high school students, American Indians consistently scored the highest on each of seven items representing disturbed eating behaviors and attitudes. This study, which included 129 American Indians, also found very high rates of self-induced vomiting and binge eating among this group.<sup>2</sup> Other small studies of American Indian adolescents also indicate high rates of disordered eating, including dieting and purging.<sup>3</sup>

## **American Indian youth express high levels of body dissatisfaction**

The largest and most comprehensive survey undertaken to date on the health status of Native American youths living on or near reservations involved 13,454 American Indians and Alaska Natives in grades 7 through 12. Approximately 41% of the adolescents reported feeling overweight, 50% were dissatisfied with their weight, and 44% worried about being overweight.<sup>4</sup>

Among American Indian youth, body dissatisfaction is associated with unhealthy weight control behaviors. In the Indian Adolescent Health Study mentioned above, almost half of the girls and one-third of the boys had been on weight loss diets in the past year, with 27% reporting self-induced vomiting and 11% reporting the use of diet pills. Girls who reported feeling overweight were more likely to engage in unhealthy weight control practices.<sup>5</sup>

## **Acculturation may increase vulnerability**

Increased contact with the mainstream culture that equates thinness with beauty seems to contribute to higher rates of disordered eating among American Indian girls. In one study, anorexic Navajo girls from Arizona were more likely to come from upwardly mobile families who moved off the reservation.<sup>6</sup> In a second study, child and adolescent members of a tribe were much more likely to prefer thinner body sizes than elder tribe members.<sup>7</sup>

Eating disturbances have also been associated with racism, social isolation, low self-worth, and pressure to look a certain way, which may increase vulnerability to developing eating disorders.<sup>8</sup>



## Obesity is also a risk factor

American Indians have a high prevalence of obesity in all age groups and both sexes.<sup>9</sup> Children who are obese are at risk for developing eating disorders and for becoming obese adults. More specifically, being overweight is a risk factor for eating disturbances in ethnically diverse women.<sup>10</sup> Attention needs to be focused, therefore, on the prevention and treatment of obesity in American Indian adolescents.

## Among American Indian youth, disordered eating is linked to other harmful behaviors

The Indian Adolescent Health Study indicates that disordered eating behaviors are related to other health-compromising behaviors.<sup>11</sup> Frequent dieting and purging among American Indian girls was associated with a wide range of risk factors, such as high emotional stress, binge eating, alcohol and tobacco use, thoughts and attempts of suicide, delinquent behaviors, and physical and sexual abuse.<sup>12</sup>

The early identification of disordered eating behaviors may help uncover risk factors for other unhealthy and possibly more serious behaviors among these adolescents.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Crago, M., Shisslak, C.M., & Estes, L.S. Eating disturbances among American minority groups: a review. *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 1996, vol. 19, pp. 239-248.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, J.E., & Krejci, J. Minorities join the majority: eating disturbances among Hispanic and Native American youth. *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 1991, vol. 10, pp. 179-186.

<sup>3</sup> Snow, J.J., & Harris, M.B. Disordered eating in Southwestern Pueblo Indians and Hispanics. *Journal of Adolescence* 1989, vol. 12, pp. 329-336; and Rosen, L.W., Shafer, C.L., Drummer, G.M., Cross, L.K., Deuman, G.W., & Malmberg, S.R. Prevalence of pathogenic weight-control behaviors among Native American women and girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 1988, vol. 7, pp. 807-811.

<sup>4</sup> Story, M., French, S.A., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Downes, B., Resnick, M.D., & Blum, R.W. Psychosocial and behavioral correlates of dieting and purging in Native American adolescents. *Pediatrics* April 1997, vol. 99, no. 4, p. e8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Yates, A. Current perspectives on the eating disorders: History, psychological and biological aspects. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 1989, vol. 28, pp. 813-828.

<sup>7</sup> Stevens, J., Story, M., Becenti, A., French, S.A., Gittelsohn, J., Going, S.B., Juhaeri, L. S., & Murray, D.M. Weight-related attitudes and behaviors in

## Things You Can Do

As an adult working with adolescent girls, you can help identify those at risk, promote an environment that discourages negative body image and disordered eating behaviors, and prevent eating disorders among this population.

1. Provide adolescents with information on the benefits of healthy eating and regular physical activity.
2. Educate parents about eating disorders.
3. Do not tolerate sexual harassment or teasing about another person's body shape, weight, or race.
4. Conduct media literacy activities that explore the images of thinness as beauty in television, magazines, and advertisements targeting girls.
5. Incorporate culturally appropriate materials, curricula, and interventions, as well as ethnically diverse role models.
6. Refer girls who want to achieve a healthy weight to appropriate health professionals for information on healthy weight management.
7. Help family identify appropriate health care providers and services.
8. Recognize the great diversity among individuals within an Indian tribe, as well as tremendous differences across the numerous Indian nations with respect to traditions and cultural heritage.

fourth grade American Indian children. *Obesity Research* 1999, vol. 7, no.1, pp. 34-42.

<sup>8</sup> Crago et al., 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Welty, T. Health implications of obesity in American Indians and Alaska Natives. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 1991, vol. 53, pp. 16165-16205.

<sup>10</sup> Crago et al., 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Story, M., French, S.A., Resnick, M., & Blum, R.W., Ethnic/racial differences in dieting behaviors and body image perceptions in adolescents. *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 1995, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 173-179.

<sup>12</sup> Story et al., 1995; and Story et al, 1997.