

American Indians and Tobacco

Definitions:

Traditional tobacco is used by some American Indians for religious, ceremonial, or medicinal purposes.

Commercial tobacco is used for recreational or habitual purposes, often causing addiction, disease and death.

History

For tribes throughout North America, the use of traditional tobacco plants for spiritual, ceremonial, and medicinal purposes goes back thousands of years. Most Indigenous nations have traditional stories explaining how tobacco was introduced to their communities, many of which emphasized the sacred properties of the plant, containing both the power to heal if used properly and the power to cause harm if used improperly.

Sacred Uses

- As a sacrifice to the Great Spirit
- As a gift when welcoming guests to the community
- As an offering to those asked to pray or share wisdom

Medicinal Uses

- As an analgesic to alleviate childbirth pains, toothaches, headaches, and earaches
- To treat a variety of ailments, including asthma, cough, rheumatism, convulsions, and intestinal disorders.
- To treat open wounds because of its presumed antiseptic qualities
- On long journeys, it was used to keep away hunger and thirst, and to prevent fatigue
- As a smudge to ward off pests

Prevalence

- 32.0% of American Indians/ Alaska Natives smoke cigarettes compared to an overall estimate of 20.9% for all adults in the United States.
- 10.9% of American Indians/Alaska Natives are current cigar smokers. The overall national estimate for adults is 5.8%.
- 8.6% of American Indians/Alaska Natives use spit tobacco. The national estimate for adults is 3.3%.

Health Effects

- Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death among American Indians and Alaska Natives.
- Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death among American Indians and Alaska Natives, and tobacco use is an important risk factor for this disease.

Tobacco Industry Influence

- To build its image and credibility in the community, the tobacco industry targets American Indians and Alaska Natives by funding cultural events such as pow-wows and rodeos.
- The tobacco industry commonly uses cultural symbols and designs to target racial/ethnic populations that include American Indians and Alaska Natives. American Spirit™ cigarettes were promoted as "natural" cigarettes; the package featured an American Indian smoking a pipe. In addition, certain tobacco product advertisements have used visual images, such as American-Indian warriors, to target their product.

Resources

Highlights from 1998 Surgeon General's Report—Tobacco Use Among U.S. Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups: American Indians and Alaska Natives and Tobacco

http://cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/sgr/sgr_1998/sgr-min-nat.htm

National Tribal Tobacco Prevention Network

http://www.npaihb.org/programs/national_tribal_tobacco_prevention_network/

Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids: Native Americans and Tobacco Use

<http://tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/index.php?CategoryID=4>

Sources

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3. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, Office of Applied Studies. National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2004 and 2005. (PDF–58KB) [cited 2008 September 26]. Available from: <http://oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh/2k5nsduh/tabs/Sect2peTabs42to46.pdf>.
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5. DHHS, Tobacco Use Among U.S. Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups, African Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics: A Report of the Surgeon General. Atlanta: U.S. DHHS. CDC, 1998.