Restoring American Indian Wellness and Preventing Cancer Through Indigenous Diets

The “First Foods Are Prevention” campaign emphasizes the importance of healthy Native foods and traditional exercise for cancer prevention.

September 20, 2023 By Laura Schmidt

The American Indian Cancer Foundation (AICAF) announced the return of its annual “First Foods Are Prevention” campaign to promote traditional food and activities as tools for cancer prevention.

The campaign was created by AICAF’s Prevention & Policy program, which educates, engages and empowers Native communities to incorporate healthy lifestyle routines to help reduce cancer risk.

Cancer affects Native communities at disproportionately high rates, according to an AICAF news release. For example, a study led by the American Cancer Society found that cancer mortality among American Indian and Alaska Native individuals is about 18% higher than among white people. Factors that put Native communities at risk for cancer include obesity, diabetes, lack of physical activity and diets low in fiber and high in animal fat.

Natural diets and active lifestyles reflected the Native way of life before Western colonization and reservation systems, according to the AICAF. “First Foods Are Prevention” aims to reinvigorate and restore Native peoples’ relationship with traditional foods and physical activities.

This fall, AICAF will share culturally tailored resources and media tools with communities to empower tribes to start their own Indigenous foods campaign.

The “First Foods Are Prevention” social media tool kit encourages individuals to share resources and templates on social media to inspire others to take action.

The tool kit includes downloadable infographics such as Healthy Eating for Strong Native Communities, which offers various ways for communities to engage with healthy foods, including community gardens and farm-to-school programs. The guide defines healthy foods as those that are native to one’s area, unprocessed foods, whole grains, lean proteins and more.

To promote physical activity, the Active Lifestyles for Strong Native Communities infographic suggests that people play Indigenous games, such as lacrosse, stickball, archery, canoeing and running.

The campaign asks individuals to use #FirstFoodsArePrevention to start a conversation about healthy Native foods and help improve wellness by promoting community gardens, establishing farmers markets and traditional dance classes.

To learn more, visit AmericanIndianCancer.org.

For related Cancer Health articles, click #Native American to read about various health issues Indigenous people face today. There, you'll find headlines such as "Native Americans Must Travel Farther to Access Cancer Care," "Cancer Deaths Are 18% Higher Among Native Americans Than Whites" and "Cancer Epidemiology in Action."

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