

Study indicates subsistence foods aid health

by Geoff Kennedy
for the Tundra Times

The subsistence diet appears to be alive and well in rural Alaska. And that diet is helping to keep Natives alive and well.

Those are two conclusions from a study of Alaska Native diets, said Betsy Nobmann, who heads the Area Nutrition Service for the Alaska Area Native Health Service.

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"I was really surprised to find how much Native foods are consumed," Nobmann said. "There's certainly documentation that people are eating fish and sea mammals."

In fact, fish ranks fifth in the list of foods consumed most frequently by Alaska Natives. In the rest of the United States, fish does not appear in the top 20 in the list of foods most frequently consumed, she said.

Alaska Natives consume twice the recommended amount of protein and more than the national average.

"Traditional Native foods are high in iron, particularly sea mammals," she said.

Although Alaska Natives eat about as much fat as other Americans, they eat a better class of fat, she said. The fat in fish is polyunsaturated, while most of the fat eaten in the rest of the country is saturated fat, which contributes to heart disease, she said.

The study also indicated Natives

drink water more frequently than other Americans.

Researchers surveyed about 28 Native adults each in 11 communities: Anchorage, Sitka, Kake, Dillingham, Pedro Bay, Pilot Point, Bethel, Kwigillingok, Mountain Village, Kotzebue and Selawik.

Five Alaska Native health organizations helped with the survey: the Maniilaq Association, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Organization, the Bristol Bay Health Corp., the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Corp. and the Southcentral Foundation.

The people in the survey reported on their diets four times a year to provide researchers an overall view of what they eat and when they eat it, Nobmann said.

She believes the survey was accurate even though researchers had no way to check on whether people were telling them what they really ate.

"I didn't get the sense that people were trying to impress us with what they were eating," Nobmann said.

"Overall, the nutrient consumption was very good," she said, "better than the (rest of the) United States in many instances."

But, she said, Natives are consuming some things that aren't good for them.

Natives drink twice as much coffee as the national average, she said, 2.7 cups per person per day.

Although evidence is conflicting about whether or to what extent coffee contributes to heart disease, coffee definitely keeps the body from absorbing iron, Nobmann said. Alaska Natives suffer from iron deficiency anemia more than other Americans, and 17 percent of pregnant Alaska women suffer from the affliction, she said.

Natives frequently take sugar and other sweeteners in their coffee and generally consume twice as much sugar as the national average, Nobmann said.

Natives don't eat enough fruits, vegetables and fiber-rich foods, the study said.

Natives need more calcium as well, Nobmann said. The lack of calcium weakens bones, especially in older women in other states, although elderly Alaska Native women don't suffer from the weakened-bone condition as much as other American women of the same age, she said.

The study reinforced the findings of previous studies, which have shown that the more Natives stray from their traditional diets, the more they tend to eat unhealthy foods.

And, despite the overall good news, the study shows that Alaska Natives aren't eating as well as they used to.

Heart disease has become the third most frequent killer of Alaska Natives. It ranks behind only injuries and cancer.

Out of 100,000 Alaska Native deaths, 112 are from heart disease; that compares to the national average of 326 per 100,000, Nobmann said.

"The bottom line is that we need to find out more about the Alaska Native diet and its relationship to heart disease," she said.