

Language a factor in Aboriginal obesity

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Unlike a western diet loaded with fat and sugar, traditional Aboriginal diets were high in carbohydrates, protein and nutrients, centring on hunted animals that produced lean meat. Credit: Rusty Stewart

Australian aboriginals who use their own language at home are less likely to be obese than those who speak only English.

University of Western Australia research found those who spoke Noongar, Yindjibarndi, Nyangumarta or similar languages had a 27 per

cent chance of being obese compared to 34.1 per cent for those who spoke only English.

"This may imply that members of the Indigenous population who have stronger ties to their origin have a lower prevalence of [obesity](#) than members who have adapted to more Western cultures," UWA's Dr Elisa Birch says.

She hypothesises language is an indicator of individuals engaging in more traditional lifestyles, including in-part how they eat.

Unlike a western diet loaded with fat and sugar, traditional Aboriginal diets were high in carbohydrates, protein and nutrients, centring on hunted animals that produced lean meat.

This was supplemented with plant foods such as yams, bush tomatoes, figs, quandong, nuts, seeds, roots and tubers, which are high in fibre and carbohydrates that our bodies digest and absorb slowly.

"There may be some value in policies aimed at teaching traditional Indigenous diets to the wider Indigenous population," Dr Birch says.

However, Aboriginal obesity is far more complex than diet, combining genetics, social attitudes, socio-economic factors such as income and behaviours such as exercise and smoking.

Together these can help explain why Aboriginal men are 1.6 times more likely, and Aboriginal women 2.2 times more likely, to be obese than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

Answers key to solving wider health problems

Finding answers is important given obesity's connection with health

problems, Dr Birch says.

"This is especially the case for Indigenous Australians whereby nearly 50 per cent of the population who are obese suffer from diabetes and 43 per cent suffer from heart and circulatory diseases," she says.

Overall, her research involved 3880 Aboriginal Australians.

It found those who walked regularly were less likely to be obese, as were those who ate fruit, those who lived with two or more children and individuals who weren't married.

Smokers were less likely to be obese, possibly due to smoking raising the metabolic rate.

The research determined study participants living in in socioeconomically advantaged neighbourhoods were far less likely to be obese than those in disadvantaged areas.

This could be due to healthier neighbourhood options in shops and restaurants, the effect of peers or simply individuals being able to afford better food, Dr Birch says.

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