

Wisconsin tribes combat diabetes by returning to tradition

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Native American communities in Wisconsin have started to take control over their health by controlling their food supply and by returning to traditional foods.

Tribes, such as the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, receive food from the USDA as part of treaty agreements. That food is highly processed, contributing to the Menominee reservation having the highest rates of Type 2 diabetes and heart disease in Wisconsin, according to Gary Besaw the director of agriculture, food systems and food distribution for the tribe.

Besaw was a panelist during the UW Global Health Symposium yesterday. This year's symposium included a focused discussion on health and food issues facing indigenous communities.

The good news is that diabetes rates among Native American and Alaskan populations have started to decrease since 2013, according to Whitney Schreiber, a diabetes specialist at the Stockbridge-Munsee Health and Wellness Center in central Wisconsin.

Citing a 2020 study from the Special Diabetes Program for Indians, Schreiber said from 2013 to 2017 the percentage of the Native Americans and Alaskan population with diabetes has dropped from 15.4 percent to 14.6 percent. No other racial or ethnic group in the U.S. had a drop in diabetes prevalence during that time period.

"It is hard to pinpoint a cause and effect," Schreiber said. "But, I do think overall we are doing well screening people and catching that Type 2 diabetes. And I do think the work we are doing in Indian Country is making a difference."

She said health and wellness programs run by the Stockbridge-Munsee Health and Wellness Center have been very helpful in educating people in her community on how to be more active and make healthier choices when making food.

Besaw has made changes to promote not only healthier food, but a traditional diet. This includes eating traditional game, such as deer, fish and rabbits, instead of cows and pigs. It also includes eating fresh produce grown in the area or foraged in the wild.

"When we signed the treaties part of that was that we would receive several things as compensation for a large section of the state of Wisconsin," he said. "One of those things that we received and continue to receive is from the USDA and that is the food commodities, and we found out after that our diets drastically changed."

According to Besaw, increasing the amount of traditional foods consumed by tribes helps decrease these diseases by returning to the more natural and healthier diets of past generations of Native Americans. It also increases their sovereignty from the U.S. government by allowing for more control over their food supply chains.

"We had such high levels [of disease] that we needed to look at how we can improve our health," Besaw said. "We needed to get back to what the old people had when they had that vibrant healthy economy, that great health and that life expectancy that was greatly expanded on what we have now."

-By Grayson Sewell



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