

# A Bridge to Health

STORY BY CARISSA HALTON | PHOTOS BY JOHN ULAN

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One of the world's leaders in finding the link between nutrition and chronic disease is working at the University of Alberta to improve the health of Aboriginal communities

Sangita Sharma has always been interested in food. Or, more accurately, she has always been interested in nutrition. “I like nutrition,” she says. “While it’s a neutral topic, you can learn so much from people and about people.”

One of the world’s leading experts in nutritional epidemiology, dietary assessment and nutritional and lifestyle interventions, Sharma has studied the health of nearly 30 ethnic groups across the globe—from Jamaican to Nepalese—in an effort to learn how a culture’s food affects its risk for a variety of diseases. But her research on a project called Healthy Foods North in Canada’s Arctic was the catalyst for her work as the University of Alberta’s Endowed Chair in Aboriginal Health.

“The first time I arrived [in the Arctic], people laughed because even my *teeth* were cold!” Sharma remembers. The Inuit and Inuvialuit people, however, were the warmest she had met in her career, excited to share their culture and food, introducing Sharma to the taste of muskox and polar bear. But globalization and global warming are gradually pushing these traditional foods out of fashion in the North, replacing them with processed foods high in sugar and fat, low in fibre and nutrients. Obesity, heart disease, diabetes

and cancer are on the rise, and even accessing treatment is a major challenge for northern indigenous people. “Consider that from Nunavut you have to fly almost a day for treatment. Who wants to fly when you’re sick?” asks Sharma. “There is an emotional and financial cost to chronic diseases in the North.”

Sharma’s consultation with community members and collaboration with local grocery stores worked to reverse this trend. Limp produce, expired cereals and processed foods were replaced with fresh vegetables, lentils and skim milk powder. Free taste tests and cooking demonstrations featured healthier alternatives, and the nutritional benefits of traditional meat were promoted. People lost weight and their vitamin intake increased. This initial work in Arctic nutrition opened the door to a variety of new projects in the North: an exploration of maternal health, a study into obesity prevention and, recently, research into how northern indigenous communities access cancer screening services.

Consultation and collaboration are a key part of her responsibilities as Endowed Chair in Aboriginal Health. Sharma will form a bridge





between health services and communities, but she will also bring to the table other University of Alberta faculties and other academic institutions worldwide as well as governments, policy-makers and private-sector partners. This kind of collaboration is vital to creating programs that incorporate indigenous knowledge to improve the population's health. "The communities know what needs to be done; they just need support facilitating."

Sharma has also been working with a number of Edmonton high schools on Why Act Now?, a project to better understand the health of urban Aboriginal youth. Preliminary data from her study suggests that more than 90 per cent of the Aboriginal youth surveyed don't get enough

dietary fibre and exceed acceptable sodium intake. As with her experience in the North, education will be critical to transforming the teens' diets. By working with Aboriginal youth, elders and other members of the community, Sharma hopes her research will inform existing Aboriginal health programs and lead to the development of new programs to fill any gaps. She is working with Elder Francis Whiskeyjack (centre, facing page) at amiskwaciy Academy in Edmonton to guide the program.

"In Canada, there is a large health disparity between the Aboriginal population and the non-Aboriginal population. There is an up to 12-year lower life expectancy and we need to eliminate that gap," Sharma says. ↴

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