

# The traditional way to Indigenous health

Lack of sleep makes you more prone to pimples, and moose is an excellent source of protein, iron and omega-3 fatty acids.

You may not have known these facts, but thanks to Dr. Sangita Sharma and the Indigenous and Global Health Research Group, more and more teenagers know these facts and more.

Sharma, the Endowed Chair in Indigenous Health, studies risk factors for cancer, heart disease, diabetes and obesity in Indigenous and new Canadian populations across nearly 30 ethnic groups in Canada's far north and Alaska and around the globe including the UK, Barbados, Hawaii and Brazil.

Canada's Indigenous populations were far healthier before they adopted a westernized diet and lifestyle, says Sharma. They now have a life expectancy of up to 12 years less than that of non-Indigenous populations.

Sharma believes the wisdom needed to close the gap lies within the communities themselves and their rich cultural traditions, so consultation and collaboration are the cornerstones of her research. The Why Act Now project is a case in point.

Why Act Now started in 2011 to study the unique barriers to health for Indigenous adolescents. Edmonton was the natural place to start as it has the second highest urban Indigenous population in Canada. The project gathered data from 553



Dr. Sangita Sharma is the Centennial Professor, Endowed Chair in Aboriginal Health, and Professor of Aboriginal and Global Health Research.

multi-ethnic youth in Edmonton of Indigenous, African, Asian and European descent, aged 11 to 23 years.

They found that 90 per cent of Indigenous youth surveyed were not getting enough dietary fibre and exceeded acceptable sodium intake. Many were falling short of their basic nutrient requirements including protein, B12, zinc, selenium, and iron, nutrients that would have been abundant in a traditional hunter-gatherer diet.

Sharma launched a partnership with local school divisions and with amiskwaciy Academy to develop and pilot a culturally appropriate intervention program for urban Indigenous youth in Grades 7 to 12. All program elements are designed and refined by youth.

The result is a rich library of resources at [whyactnow.ca](http://whyactnow.ca), grounded in the context of the medicine wheel encompassing spirit, body, mind and emotion, and available for download.

# Why this research matters:

## **To Indigenous communities:**

This work helps Indigenous communities reclaim their traditional wisdom and adopt strategies that improve all aspects of mental, physical, spiritual and emotional health.

## **To Albertans:**

Indigenous peoples make up six per cent of Alberta's population and nearly half of that number is under the age of 25. Ensuring the health of our Indigenous youth will mean a healthier future for Alberta overall.

## **To the health care system:**

The greatest impact on the health care system will be a reduction in chronic disease in the province among Indigenous populations.