

HISTORY

Native Hawaiians are descended from Polynesian communities that explored the Pacific Islands. Even with the arrival of Westerners in the late 18th century, the Native Hawaiian population in Hawaii remained relatively stable at approximately 800,000 to 1 million.¹ A hundred years later, however, the population dwindled to nearly 40,000 due to deaths from disease and war. In the last century, Native Hawaiians have been increasing in number and reestablishing their cultural heritage.²

The Native Hawaiian Health Care Improvement Act of 1988, which was reauthorized in 1992 and 2000, was established to “raise the health status of Native Hawaiians to the highest possible level and to encourage the maximum participation of Native Hawaiians in order to achieve this objective.”³ In addition, the United States government in 1993 issued an apology to the Native Hawaiian community for the hardships and suffering endured during the colonization of Hawaii. While this has helped to heal some old scars, Native Hawaiians continue to experience special needs and concerns in terms of health status, and bring many cultural strengths as well.⁴

DEMOGRAPHICS

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that in 2000 nearly 141,000 people in the United States indicated they were Native Hawaiian (one race alone)⁵ and over 401,000 that were Native Hawaiian alone or in combination with other races⁶.

In 1990, over 50% of Native Hawaiians in Hawaii had graduated from high school; however, only 2% had gone on to complete a bachelor’s degree or higher. The vast majority of Native Hawaiians are fluent in English. Over 14% of Native Hawaiian families live below the federal poverty level.⁷ Approximately 28% of all recipients of financial assistance (cash benefits) in Hawaii are Native Hawaiian; approximately 19% of Medicaid and Food Stamps recipients are also Native Hawaiian.⁸

HEALTH STATUS

Native Hawaiians have among the highest death rates of all groups in Hawaii.

It is difficult to characterize the health status of Native Hawaiians. Many studies do not differentiate between the various ethnicities studied. Small sample sizes make it difficult to generalize research findings. Finally, in some cases, data are just not available. For

these reasons, the data contained here provide only a rough estimate of Native Hawaiian health status

Native Hawaiians have among the highest death rates of all groups in Hawaii (927 vs. 650 per 100,000). However, when pure Native Hawaiians are disaggregated from part Native Hawaiians, pure Native Hawaiians have a tremendously higher

mortality rate than all other groups (2,200 per 100,000). This trend is also seen for most diseases in which data is available by pure or part Hawaiian status.⁹

MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

Approximately 34% of all children born in Hawaii in 1996 were Native Hawaiian.¹⁶ The Hawaii State Department of Health found that Native Hawaiian women were less likely to receive proper prenatal care, with only 76% receiving care in the first trimester compared to 82% of all women in the state.¹⁰ Of all women who did not receive prenatal care until the third trimester, nearly one-third were Native Hawaiian.¹¹ Native Hawaiians in Hawaii also have a high teen birth rate; over half of all births to mothers under the age of 19 were among Native Hawaiians.¹⁶

CHRONIC DISEASES

Cardiovascular Disease

Heart disease is a major cause of death and disability among Native Hawaiians. Native Hawaiians age 36-65 in Hawaii are nearly one and half times more likely to experience heart disease than other racial groups.¹¹ Native Hawaiians also have a higher rate of death and disability due to stroke and cerebrovascular conditions than other populations (mortality rate of 58 per 100,000).⁹ Native Hawaiians have higher rates of hypertension than non-Hawaiians. Nearly half of Native Hawaiians are obese, defined as over 20% of ideal weight. This is almost double the rate of obesity found among the overall population in Hawaii.¹² Both hypertension and obesity are major risk factors for cardiovascular and other diseases.

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Cancer

Native Hawaiians have the highest rate of deaths due to cancer compared to any other ethnic group in Hawaii (229 per 100,000) and the third highest rate in the country.

- Native Hawaiian males have the highest rates of death from lung, liver, and pancreatic cancer.
- Native Hawaiian females have the highest mortality rate from lung, liver, pancreatic, breast, cervical, uterine, stomach, and rectal cancer.
- While mortality rates for many cancers have decreased among Native Hawaiians, they have increased for liver, kidney, and uterine cancer among women.¹³

Cancer screening is less common among Native Hawaiians than among other communities, and cancers among this population are often diagnosed at more advanced stages.¹⁴ Once Native Hawaiians are diagnosed with cancer, they have a 5-year survival rate which is 18% lower than among whites. Factors

such as smoking, obesity, high levels of alcohol consumption, high fat and high calorie diets are thought to contribute to the high rates of cancer in Native Hawaiians. In addition, cultural factors such as a resigned attitude towards cancer, and the lack of accessible and appropriate prevention and education programs also lead to high rates of cancer and cancer death.¹⁵

Diabetes

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Native Hawaiians have extremely high rates of diabetes. They are over 5 times as likely as non-Hawaiians to experience diabetes between the ages of 19 to 35 (11% vs. 2%). Between age 36 and 64, Native Hawaiians have a rate of diabetes that is over twice that of other populations (79 vs. 34 per 1000).¹⁶ Culturally appropriate interventions are of critical importance in the control of diabetes, as diabetes management is dependent on diet and lifestyle factors.¹⁷

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Infectious diseases were historically a major problem for Native Hawaiians. As of 1996, 20% of all deaths due to AIDS in Hawaii were among Native Hawaiians.¹⁶ Native Hawaiians account for approximately 4% of AIDS cases among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in California.¹⁸

HEALTH BEHAVIORS AND VIOLENCE

Smoking is more common among Native Hawaiians than other populations in Hawaii. In fact, 27% of Native Hawaiians were smokers in 1993. Alcohol abuse is also found to be a major problem in the community, particularly binge drinking.¹² While overall injury statistics are similar among Native Hawaiians and other populations, one study has found that younger Native Hawaiians have significantly higher rates of suicide, assault, and traffic accidents.¹⁹

Traditional Medicine

Traditional methods of Hawaiian healing were nearly lost in the early 1900s, but have gained renewed interest in recent years. Native Hawaiian healers rely on a variety of indigenous plants and herbs to treat illness.²⁰ In addition, spirituality, environment, and personal relationships are central to Native Hawaiian healing practices.²¹

CULTURAL BARRIERS

Cultural issues significantly impact community health. Unfortunately, few programs are designed to build upon cultural assets and community strengths. Many Native Hawaiians place tremendous importance on spirituality, generosity, harmony, and humility.²² Valuing native culture and traditions and using them to complement Western health practices will help reduce barriers to health care and improve the health of the community. Viewing these beliefs as cultural strengths, and incorporating spirituality into a Western healing regimen could be extremely beneficial.²³

In addition, programs which provide culturally competent nutrition education have proven to be successful in improving and maintaining health. Traditional Hawaiian Diet programs (THD) provide intensive instruction on traditional diet, cooking methods,

and serving sizes to local Hawaiian communities. The program has been highly successful in lowering and controlling blood sugar levels among diabetic patients.²⁴

RESOURCES

The following agencies are able to provide additional information regarding the Native Hawaiian community:

- Papa Ola Lokahi
808-536-9453
- Native Hawaiian Health Care Program
301-594-4450
www.bphc.hrsa.gov
- Office of Hawaiian Affairs
<http://oha.org>
- Hawaii State DOH-Office of Health Equity
808-586-4673

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- ⁴ *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders: A People Looking Forward*. Rockville, MD: White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; 2001. Available at www.aapi.gov.
- ⁵ United States Census Bureau, Census 2000. Summary File 1 (SF 1) 100-Percent Data. Table PCT 8: Native Hawaiian And Other Pacific Islander Alone with One Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander Category For Selected Groups.
- ⁶ United States Census Bureau, Census 2000. Summary File 1 (SF 1) 100-Percent Data. Table PCT 10: Native Hawaiian And Other Pacific Islander Alone Or In Combination with One Or More Races and With One or More Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander Categories For Selected Groups.
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- ²⁰ Judd, N., 'Laau Lapau: herbal healing among contemporary Hawaiian healers,' *Pacific Health Dial.* 1998; 5(2):239-245.
- ²¹ Nani'ole, J., Meyer, MA., 'Ka Maka o ka Ihe Laumeki – the point of the barbed spear: Native Hawaiian epistemology and health,' *Pacific Health*

Dial. 1998; 5(2):357-369.

²² Kanahale, GHS,. *Ku Kanaka - Stand tall.* Unniversity of Hawai'i Press and Waiaha Foundation, Honolulu: 1986.

²³ Mokuau, N., et al., 'Na Kupuna in Hawai'i: a review of social and health status, service use and the importance of value based interventions,' *Pacific Health Dialog* 5(2): 282-289.

²⁴ Hughes, C., 'Traditional Hawaiian diet programs: a culturally competent chronic disease intervention,' *Pacific Health Dialog* 5(2): 328-331.