



The Health of Older Adults

Information from the national and regional reports of the 1997 *First Nations and Inuit Regional Health Surveys*

What Questions Did The Regional Health Surveys Ask About Older Adults?

The Regional Health Surveys (RHS) included some questions that were the same across the whole country and some questions that were only asked in particular regions. However, no region chose to focus specifically on older adults. The national questions asked about the same topics as for adults in general, that is:

- Chronic conditions
- Activity limitations
- Smoking
- Dental health
- Health services, and
- Wellness

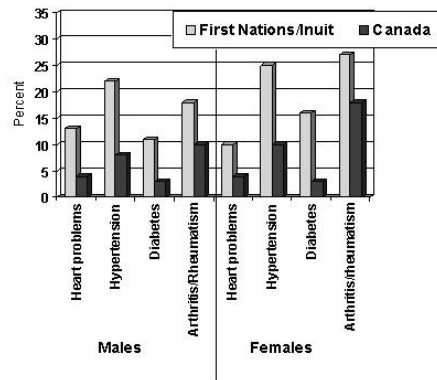
Research from the United States suggests Aboriginal Peoples develop some of the diseases associated with aging at younger ages than average. Because of this, the RHS defined older adults as anyone older than 45 years.



Chronic Conditions

Like the American research, the RHS found that First Nations and Inuit adults 45 and older are far more likely to have chronic conditions – such as heart problems, diabetes, or arthritis – than other Canadians of the same age. At ages 45 to 64, one person in five has diabetes; after age 65, one person in three is affected. Many diabetics also have high blood pressure or heart disease. The older the person, the more likely they are to have several of these conditions.

Chronic Conditions
First Nations/Inuit Compared to Canadian
Age-Adjusted Rates for Adults 45 and Older





Older adults will need services to help them cope with these chronic conditions and to prevent or delay complications. Those who receive treatments such as surgery or dialysis will need programs to improve their quality of life during and after treatment.

Many older adults said they want better education about medication, diabetes and disease prevention. This education will have to take into account the fact that many older people have little schooling and speak an Aboriginal language.



Activity Limitations

Probably because of the rates of chronic conditions, activity limitations are common in older adults. One in four older adults is limited in his/her activities around the home. One in eight is unable to leave home and requires help with personal care. One in three has hearing problems.



Smoking

Older First Nations Peoples and Inuit are twice as likely as other Canadians to have a smoking habit. The smokers report poorer health than non-smokers or ex-smokers and they are more likely to have each of the chronic diseases that the survey asked about. The longer and more heavily people have smoked, the more likely they are to report having asthma, breathing problems or high blood pressure.



Dental Health

Interestingly, older adults are less likely than other First Nations Peoples and Inuit to report they need dental care. One possibility is that older adults ate traditional food for most of their lives, so they now have good dental health. A more negative interpretation is that older adults need less dental care because they now have dentures.





Opinions About Health Services

Like younger respondents, about half of the older adults believe First Nations Peoples and Inuit do not receive the same quality of health care as other Canadians. Older adults believe that almost all the services mentioned to them need to be improved. They especially want improvements in:

- Disease prevention
- Medication awareness
- Diabetes education
- Paediatric care (almost everyone – no matter what their age – wanted improvements in paediatric services)

Besides the prevention programs people are asking for, the people with activity limitations will need transportation, medical escorts and translation services so that they can receive health care. Supports such as home care services will also be needed so older people can continue to live in their home community.



Opinions About Community Wellness

Although they are not very pleased with the available health services, older adults tend to be more satisfied with community progress in other areas. Besides seeing improvements in housing, many older adults feel there has been progress in:

- Returning to traditional ways
- School programs to teach children about Aboriginal culture
- Use of Aboriginal languages
- First Nations/Inuit control of programs

They are less likely to believe there has been progress in reducing alcohol/drug abuse, job opportunities or the availability of First Nations and Inuit health care workers.

Like most of the RHS respondents, 80 per cent of older adults agree a return to traditional ways would improve community wellness. More than two-thirds said they have seen progress in areas such as traditional ceremonies, renewal of Native spirituality and traditional approaches to health. About half feel there has been progress in returning to the traditional roles of men and women.





About the Regional Health Surveys

The statistics in this Fact Sheet are drawn from the 1997 *First Nations and Inuit Regional Health Surveys*.

The surveys covered people living in 186 First Nations communities spread across most of southern Canada and in the Inuit communities of Labrador. The surveys did not include people living off-reserve, in the North or in the James Bay area of Quebec. All told, the survey included 9,870 adults.

Sampling methods varied from one region to another. Also, the definition of adult varied. British Columbia considered anyone older than 16 years to be an adult while other regions counted anyone 18 and older to be an adult.

