



# *Children's Health*

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

## **What Questions Did The Regional Health Surveys Ask About Children?**

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. For children, the national questions asked about:

- Birth weight
- Breast-feeding
- Health and health problems
- Behaviour problems
- Knowledge of Aboriginal culture

In addition, some regions asked about topics like

- The mother's prenatal habits
- Nutrition
- Children's leisure activities
- Emotional and conduct disorders



## **Children's Environment**

Although people report many problems in First Nations and Inuit communities, many parents still believe they are good places for children. For instance, in Ontario, 85 per cent of adults consider their community an average or better than average place to bring up children. And the proportion of those who said it is safe for children to play outside during the day is higher than the Canadian average.

However, lack of play spaces may be a problem. Results from the Ontario and Saskatchewan surveys suggest most First Nations and Inuit communities lack recreational facilities for children such as parks, swimming pools, rinks, and playgrounds.

Another aspect that may affect children's health is tobacco smoke. According to the national RHS results, 57 per cent of households contain smokers, which means children in those households are routinely exposed to second-hand smoke.





## Prenatal and Infant Health

According to results from Nova Scotia's survey, 52 per cent of mothers continued to smoke while they were pregnant – a much higher proportion than among Canadians in general. Smoking during pregnancy increases the risk that the child will be of low birth weight. Encouragingly, however, results from Nova Scotia and Manitoba show that most mothers stop drinking alcohol during pregnancy.

Birth weights that are unusually low or high put children at risk for health problems. Low birth weight did not seem to be a problem, but high birth weight was more common. Almost a fifth of all First Nations and Inuit children weighed more than four kilograms at birth.

About 50 per cent of all First Nations and Inuit babies were breast-fed as compared to 75 per cent of all Canadian babies. But the women who breast-fed did so for longer periods than average. Half of them breast-fed for more than six months whereas only a quarter of all Canadian babies are breast-fed for that long.



## Behaviours That Affect Health

The Nova Scotia survey found that children's nutritional habits were fairly good. Most children ate breakfast every

day and ate healthy foods at lunch. However, they tended to snack on less-healthy foods like cookies, chips or pastry.

The national portion of the survey did not ask about children's smoking behaviour, but Manitoba's survey did. Nineteen per cent of parents in Manitoba said their child (under age 18) smoked.



## Physical Health

Across the country, 84 per cent of parents said their child's health was very good or excellent. The most common problems that people reported were:

- Ear problems (15% of children)
- Allergies (13%)
- Asthma (12%)
- Bronchitis (7%) and
- Overweight (7%)

Bronchitis, asthma and ear problems were more common in young children while older children were more likely to be overweight.

Many of these problems are respiratory. Respiratory infections are common for children throughout Canada, but First Nations and Inuit children may be unusually subject to them because of crowded housing and exposure to wood smoke and second-hand smoke from cigarettes.



## Emotional and Social Health

The national portion of the RHS looked at children's emotional health in broad terms, by asking parents:

- If the child got along with family
- If the child had more behaviour problems than normal
- If they were satisfied with their child's knowledge of Aboriginal culture

About three-quarters of all children got along well with their families, although this was less likely to be true of the older children. More than two-thirds of parents were satisfied with their child's knowledge of Aboriginal culture. Only 17 per cent of parents said their child had more behaviour problems than other children, although again this proportion rose with the child's age.

Ontario's survey looked at emotional and social problems in more depth. The results suggest that conduct disorders (aggression, damage to property) may be more frequent than average in First Nations children. In contrast, symptoms of hyperactivity were somewhat less common than average. Emotional disorders (seeming unhappy, crying a lot, being tense) were somewhat higher than average for First Nations boys, but about average for girls.

## 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 Alberta, in the North, or in the James Bay area of Quebec. All told, the survey included 4,138 children. Parents answered on their children's behalf.

Sampling methods varied from one region to another. Also, the definition of adult varied. Some regions considered anyone older than 15 years to be an adult while other regions used 18 years as the cut-off point.

