



# ORAL HEALTH AND OVERALL HEALTH IN INDIAN COUNTRY

**May 16, 2017**

Studies continue to demonstrate that your oral health is directly connected to your overall health. This is especially evident among American Indians and Alaskan Natives (AI/ANs). “Studies also suggest that oral bacteria and the inflammation associated with periodontitis - a severe form of gum disease - might play a role in some diseases. In addition, certain diseases, such as diabetes and HIV/AIDS, can lower the body’s resistance to infection, making oral health problems more severe.”<sup>1</sup>

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Over 80% of American Indian and Alaskan Native children suffer from dental caries by the age of eight, compared with 50% for the same age for the rest of the population.<sup>2</sup> ”

In the absence of proper oral hygiene, bacteria can reach high levels that can lead to a variety of serious medical conditions and can even become fatal.

The following conditions have been linked to oral health disease:

- Endocarditis
- HIV/AIDS
- Pregnancy complications
- Diabetes
- Cardiovascular disease
- Osteoporosis
- Alzheimer’s disease

In addition to AI/ANs living on tribal lands, urban populations also face a large disparity in oral health care. Many may go years without being seen or having access to dental care. This is a problem that is currently being addressed on a local and national level. AI/AN’s aged 65 and older have nearly 3 times as much untreated decay as U.S. whites and over 10% more than the next highest minority group.<sup>3</sup> President Brian Cladoosby, Chairman of the Swinomish Tribe in Washington State has been at the forefront of addressing this issue. “We as Indians have long faced an oral health crisis, and the crisis is only growing. There just aren’t enough dentists in Indian country to address this crisis.”<sup>4</sup> Some would argue that many more AI/ANs now have access to routine visits with the introduction of mid-level providers called dental therapists. Others believe that there should be better incentives such as a more aggressive student loan debt forgiveness that in turn will help to place and retain dentists in underserved areas.

## References

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