

Diabetes Rises Sharply Among Native Americans

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Cases of diabetes among Native Americans grew at an "alarming" pace through much of the 1990s, according to US government researchers. Most troubling, they say, is the rising rate of type 2 diabetes among young adults, a population once considered virtually immune to the disease.

Between 1990 and 1997, diabetes cases went up nearly 30% among Native Americans and Alaska Natives, according to researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. Although the data did not distinguish type 1 from type 2 diabetes, Native Americans typically suffer from type 2, the form of the disease linked to obesity.

Type 1 diabetes, which is much less common, is an autoimmune disease that most often strikes in childhood and leads to life-long dependency on insulin shots for survival.

Type 2 diabetes was once largely limited to adults older than 50, but recent years have seen a shift in that trend. In this study, Nilka Rios Burrows and her colleagues found that while the steepest increase in diabetes--43%--occurred among men aged 45 to 64, cases also shot up among younger adults.

Among those aged 20 to 44, diabetes cases rose 36% among men and 25% among women. And although the overall prevalence of diabetes remained relatively low among Native American children and teenagers, new cases in youngsters jumped 23% among males and 18% among females. The findings are published in the December issue of *Diabetes Care*.

Burrows told Reuters Health that these findings reflect what is going on across the US. Recently, the CDC reported that the 1990s saw a 70% rise in type 2 diabetes among Americans in their 30s. Other age groups showed less dramatic, but significant, increases.

While many factors, including genetics, determine diabetes risk, experts place much of the blame for the precipitous rise in diabetes on the concurrent increase of obesity in the US. Burrows said that Americans' fat- and calorie-laden diets, coupled with a slump in physical activity, have helped fuel the diabetes explosion.

The fact that younger people are being diagnosed with the disease should sound a "public health alarm," according to Burrows. The longer a person has diabetes, she noted, the higher the risk of serious complications including heart disease, kidney failure or blindness.

Burrows advised people with a family history of diabetes to have a doctor evaluate their lifestyle risk factors. A diet-and-exercise plan, she said, may help reign in the risk.