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New study: Poor nutrition in Aboriginal children starts from first foods

New research suggests fruit and vegetables are luxuries for young Aboriginal children in remote locations, with a third (33%) missing out on these nutritious foods.

The [new study](#), published in the Dietitians Association of Australia's journal *Nutrition & Dietetics*ⁱ, also found one in four (25%) had sweet drinks and 20 per cent had processed meats, on the day prior to the survey.

Researcher Dympna Leonard and her colleagues surveyed parents and carers on the dietary habits of 227 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, aged six to 24 months, from six remote communities across northern Australia.

Ms Leonard, an Accredited Practising Dietitian and Public Health Nutritionist, said she was encouraged by some positive aspects of the diet of young Aboriginal children, such as high breastfeeding rates.

She said 67 per cent of children were reported to have been breastfed on the day prior to the survey, with higher rates (80%) among those aged under 12 months.

"Another positive of our findings was that nutritious choices like fruit and bush tucker were more often reported in 'pay week', which suggests that families like to get these foods when they can afford them," said Ms Leonard.

But she said her research suggests poor nutrition in Aboriginal children begins from their first solid foods.

"These findings are particularly worrying because poor diet is the leading preventable cause of ill health in Australia and globally, contributing to almost 18 per cent of deaths in Australiaⁱⁱ, with population groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more at risk," said Ms Leonard.

She added that chronic diseases, often caused by long-term poor diet, are responsible for more than two thirds of the gap in health between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australiansⁱⁱⁱ.

"Poor diet choices such as high-sugar drinks and snacks, have also been reported in a study of the diet of non-Indigenous young children^{iv}, but only a few (4%) of those non-indigenous children had no fruit or vegetables on the day prior to the survey, compared with 33 per cent in our study," said Ms Leonard.

Ms Leonard called for more support for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents to be able to provide a nutritious diet for their families.

"Improving access to healthy and affordable food is essential, but there also needs to be investment in promoting a healthy diet in pregnancy, breastfeeding, nutrient-dense first foods and suitable drink choices. Such initiatives would make a huge difference in the lives of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants and young children," said Ms Leonard.

The Federal Government's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023, identifies these nutrition priorities but the companion implementation plan does not specify related goals and deliverables for implementation^v.

Nutrition remains the 'gap' in 'Closing the Gap'^{vi}.

"Good nutrition not only supports early growth and development, and helps prevent anaemia, it also plays a role in educational achievement, and down the track, lowers the risk of chronic disease – conditions like obesity, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes," said Dietitians Association of Australia spokesperson Natasha Murray.

Ms Leonard's findings bridge a significant knowledge gap, as the country's national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey did not include children younger than two years.

ENDS

For further information or to organise an interview with Dympna Leonard, contact Pattie King, Dietitians Association of Australia, on 0409 661 920.

Nutrition Journalism Award

Applications for the Dietitians Association of Australia's 2017 'Nutrition Journalism Award' are open. The Award acknowledges and celebrates quality nutrition reporting by Australian journalists. Submit to either the short-lead or long-lead category. It's simple to apply – visit '[Newsroom](#)' on the DAA website for more information.

Nutrition & Dietetics Journal

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ⁱ Leonard D et al. Poor nutrition from first foods: A cross-sectional study of complementary feeding of infants and young children in six remote Aboriginal communities across Northern Australia. *Nutr Diet* 2017; 74: 436-45.

ⁱⁱ Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. Global Burden of Disease data Australia. Available from: <http://www.healthdata.org/gbd/data>; Accessed November 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australian Burden of Disease Study: Impact and causes of illness and death in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People 2011. Canberra AIHW, 2016 Contract No.: BOD 7.

^{iv} Byrne R, Magarey A, Daniels L. Food and beverage intake in Australian children aged 12-16 months participating in the Nourish and SAIDI studies. *Aust N Z J Public Health* 2014;38(4):326-31.

^v Department of Health. Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023. Canberra: Australian Government, 2015.

^{vi} Browne J et al. Aboriginal health policy: Is nutrition the 'gap' in 'Closing the gap'? *Aust N Z J Public Health* 2014; 38: 362-9.