

EVIDENCE-BASED CARE SHEET

Aboriginal, Navajo Patients: Providing Culturally Competent Care

What We Know

In 2010, the United States Census recorded approximately 2.9 million Native Americans (formerly called American Indians) from more than 550 federally recognized tribes in 35 states. The Navajo, or *Dineh*, which in Navajo translates as “The People,” are the second largest tribe of Native Americans, with close to 300,000 members, which is surpassed only by the Cherokee with approximately 730,000 members. There are more than 70 clans in the Navajo tribe, and their history extends more than 1,000 years. The Navajo Nation has specific rules for membership: a person must prove at least one-quarter Navajo ancestry and have no membership in any other tribe. ^(10,19,27,28)

The Navajo Nation is sovereign. Although the tribe has governing authority in the Navajo Reservation, they are obligated to collaborate with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is a unit of the United States Department of the Interior, in matters related to the administration and management of the Reservation land, which is held in trust by the U.S. The Navajo Reservation is larger than the 10 smallest states combined and extends over 27,000 square miles throughout Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. It is largely in the area identified as the “Four Sacred Mountains” (also called the Four Corners), which is the traditional Navajo homeland. Historically, the Navajo lifestyle was nomadic because of the need to find fresh grazing grounds for their herds of sheep. Today, tourism, industrial development, oil production, and coal and uranium mining are the principal sources of revenue. The Navajo are renowned weavers, potters, and silversmiths. Many Navajo have emigrated from tribal lands in search of employment; however, members return to tribal lands frequently to reestablish their cultural bonds. ^(2,10,17,19,20,22,27)

Navajo have a history of oppression from the dominant White culture. They were forced to move from their homeland to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, over a period of 4 years beginning in 1864. The memory of this forced relocation, called the “Long Walk”, and certain other federal actions are considered to be painful chapters in Navajo history and defining elements in their cultural identity. ^(6,19)

The Navajo are matrilineal, and grandmothers and mothers are at the center of the community. They are a socially and culturally independent people that have large, extended families. Relationships are characterized largely by consensus and cooperation rather than competition and independence, and it is expected that individual ambition will be subordinated to group interests. Generally, Navajo individuals seek to avoid conflict. In the event of a disagreement, the parties do not address one another but attempt to resolve conflict through third-party compromise. A telling insight of the Navajo character and spirituality is found in the naming of children. Although children are given names at birth, the name is not revealed publicly until their first laugh, when their soul and self-identity are considered to be viable. ^(2,6,19)

There was no written Navajo language until the 1970s, and many older persons speak little or no English. Nonverbal communication is a practiced skill, and periods of silence denote respect. The lack of written language and the complex structure of the spoken language was considered to be an advantage of the Navajos during World War II, when some tribal members distinguished themselves as “Code Talkers.” As members of the U.S. Marine

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Corps, they were able to use a coded version of their language to transmit messages that were unintelligible to enemy forces. The Navajo language does not have a future-tense verb, in part because the future is viewed with so much uncertainty that planning is considered foolish. The structure of the language reflects the Navajo perception of time as present, past, and future, in that order. Time is considered a concept that is unique to each individual (e.g., an event begins when the individual arrives, not according to a preset schedule). ^(2,10,19,28)

Educational achievement among the Navajo is lower than that of similar populations, and Navajos are underrepresented in colleges and universities. Historically, learning about tribal culture has received greater social support than the education offered by mainstream America. Employment is often limited because of inadequate education, and the unemployment level averages 40–50%; depending on the community, unemployment can reach 85% or be as low as 15%. ^(2,4,6)

The traditional Navajo dwelling is a *hogan*, which is a dome shaped, windowless dwelling with the door positioned to the east to face the morning sun. On the reservation, the hogan is utilized for tribal ceremonies and, in rare instances, as the family home. Many Navajo live in family groups in houses and mobile homes that are dispersed over large tracts of land. These communities frequently do not have running water and are not connected to utility lines. Approximately 12% of Native American homes lack safe and adequate water and waste disposal facilities. Satellite access is often necessary for telephone, radio, and Internet. ^(10,17,19,20,22,28)

The Public Health Service: Indian Health Service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (IHS) is the principal federal healthcare provider and health advocate for Native Americans. Because of problems accessing the services offered by the IHS, the quality of Navajo healthcare is inconsistent. ^(10,17,19,20,27)

This Evidence-Based Care Sheet is designed as an awareness tool for working with the Navajo community to encourage