

On the road again: Nation's oldest and largest Aboriginal health study

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The oldest and largest study of Aboriginal people in Australia has begun its fourth wave of data collection.

The Australian Aboriginal Birth Cohort Study (ABC), study aims to identify early those most at risk of developing chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular, kidney and mental health and help target intervention strategies at the appropriate age.

This prospective life course study based at the Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin, has been following the health of 686 Aboriginal people since their birth in 1987-1990, and previously completed two successful follow-up waves when participants were aged 11yrs and 18yrs.

Chief Investigator, Dr Gurmeet Singh said the study participants, now aged between 24 and 28, were at a crucial time for identifying early risk factors for chronic diseases.

"Obesity is the major risk factor for developing diseases such as diabetes, heart and kidney disease, worldwide," she said.

When last seen, at an average age of 18 years, this cohort had very low rates of overweight and obesity. However ABS statistics report increasing rates of obesity in the Aboriginal population from 25 years of age.

"This upcoming round of comprehensive health checks will enable us to confirm if this increase in body weight does indeed occur at this age, as well as allow us to assess the effect of obesity on early markers of chronic disease," Dr Singh said.

"The study also uses the checks as an opportunity to assess specific important conditions, such as the status of iodine," she said.

Dr Singh said the study was ideally positioned to assess the impact of mandatory fortification of bread with iodised salt on iodine status.

"The last wave provided the only available data on iodine status of people in the Northern Territory. In 2009, the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council required that non-iodised salt be replaced with iodised salt in bread as a means of preventing iodine deficiency," she said.

"Low iodine levels lead to low levels of thyroid hormones which in turn lead to slower mental activity, slower metabolism and increased weight gain. The study is well positioned to report on the effects of this regulation."

A research team will visit participants in Darwin and at over 40 urban and remote communities across the Top End from 2013 through to 2015. Participants will undergo a comprehensive health check including body measurements, ultrasounds, heart rate monitoring, blood pressure, blood and urine tests, and emotional wellbeing assessments.

This prospective life course study continues to be a valuable resource in informing policy and procedures relating to improving Aboriginal health and well-being.

The ABC study has been highly successful, resulting in over 30 publications in peer-reviewed journals, and has been supported by grants from National Health and Medical Research Council, the Heart Foundation, the Colonial Foundation, Channel 7 Foundation SA, Darwin Honda, CVL Pfizer, and an NT Research and Innovation Award.

The research team would like to speak to all participants of the ABC study. If you are one of the original ABC participants, someone in your family is, or you would like to know when they will be visiting your community, please contact the ABC Study team.

For more information about the ABC Study and its upcoming wave:

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Background: Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) are Australia's only Medical Research Institute dedicated to improving Indigenous health and wellbeing. We have a 28-year history of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies work at the frontline and collaborate broadly, partnering with over 60 Indigenous communities across Northern Australia to create resources, grow local skills, and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.