

# Prevent, reverse the tide of diabetes

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Seminole Tribe members – and all Floridians – may want to step up their game in order to reverse the tide of diabetes as the problem continues to worsen in the Sunshine State.

Finding ways to eat healthier and get more exercise will combat the disease, a major health issue facing Native Americans. Weight-lifting and other muscle-building exercises are also proving to be important.

“Diet and exercise – that’s how you prevent diabetes,” said John Blievernicht, program administrator of the Native American Fitness Council, who has helped organize exercise programs for Seminole adults and children. “Start slowly with walking, and then progress to higher intensity training, including resistance training that works your muscles. There’s just a lot of benefit being shown with higher-intensity exercise.”

Diabetes is on the rise throughout the state. In 2012, the disease contributed to the deaths of 20.7 percent of Native Americans, up from 15.3 percent in 2007, according to the latest figures from the Florida Department of Health.

Similar increases were seen among all Floridians, but Native Americans remain almost twice as likely to die from diabetes-related causes as non-Indians, Florida figures show.

The disease develops when the body cannot properly control sugar in the bloodstream. The body stops making enough of the hormone insulin to process sugar or loses the ability to use insulin. This causes sugar to build up, leading to heart disease, blindness, organ failure and damage to the extremities. People with diabetes typically must take pills or insulin injections to control their blood sugar.

Most people get the disease as adults (type 2 diabetes) often as a result of being overweight. State figures show 40 percent of Native Americans in

Florida were obese in 2012, compared to 25 percent of the overall population. Other factors, such as family history, also raise the risk of diabetes.

In response, Native American leaders have been working to attack obesity because diabetes can be lessened or eliminated by simply losing weight. Also, the Florida Department of Health has been working more closely with Tribes on the problem.

The Seminoles organized the Rez Rally, a 5-kilometer race (3.1 miles) that has grown into a major cultural event as well as Seminole Pathways, a weekly walking program developed by the Health Department that has received national recognition.

The sessions start with nutrition classes to educate Tribal members about healthier foods. The message: Add more fruits, vegetables and high-fiber foods to your plate, and limit processed foods and the American diet plagued with too much salt, sugar and fat.

The Tribe also started a fitness council several years ago to initiate fun exercises such as swimming programs for kids and the annual Trike Fest for seniors.

Blievernicht urges Tribes across the nation to advance to more strenuous activities. People should consult their doctor before starting or increasing an exercise plan.

“We make sure our programs involve diabetes prevention,” Blievernicht said. “Not just cardiovascular training for the heart, but resistance training is very important in diabetes. We tell the people, start slow and progress easily. It doesn’t have to be hard.”

For more information, contact the Health Department at 954-962-2009 or [www.SemTribe.com/Services/Health.aspx](http://www.SemTribe.com/Services/Health.aspx); the Native American Fitness Council at 928-774-3048 or [www.NativeAmericanFitnessCouncil.com](http://www.NativeAmericanFitnessCouncil.com); or the Florida Department of Health at 850-245-4330 or [www.HealthiestWeightFlorida.com](http://www.HealthiestWeightFlorida.com).

