

# Understanding Pediatric Overweight in Cree Communities in James Bay Quebec

James Makokis\*, Saddle Lake (Cree) Nutritional Science Student; Supervisor: Dr. Noreen D. Willows®, Community Nutritionist

## Summary

In June and July of 2003, James Makokis and Noreen Willows, a professor at the University of Alberta, traveled for one month to three Cree communities in the James Bay region of Quebec. The communities were Chisasibi, Waskaganish, and Mistissini (see map). Community based nutrition research was conducted on the issue of pediatric overweight and obesity. A local Cree Community Nutrition Collaborator assisted the research in the communities of Chisasibi and Waskaganish and Community Health Representatives (CHR's) assisted in Mistissini.

## Introduction

### WHO WAS INVOLVED?

- Three of nine northern Cree communities (coastal and inland) in James Bay, Quebec.

### WHAT ARE THE HEALTH ISSUES?

- Increased rate of overweight and obesity across all age groups.
- Children experience lifestyle related diseases such as Type II Diabetes, cardiovascular disease, etc. at earlier ages.
- Forced to live with complications of diseases longer than adults.
- In the past, Cree people who had a larger body size were viewed as healthier ensuring survival throughout harsh winters.
- Loss of traditional practices due to outside influence and shift to community (sedentary) living, combined with traditional Cree view of body size results in decrease in health status.

### WHAT KIND OF RESEARCH?

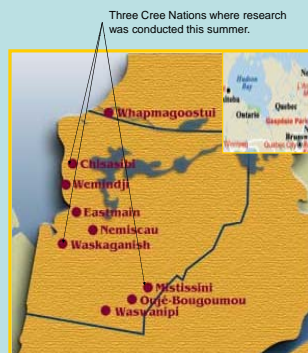
- Needs assessment required before pediatric overweight intervention is implemented.
- The research questions we tried to answer this summer included:
  1. What knowledge, attitudes and beliefs exist regarding pediatric overweight?
  2. What community resources, services and programs exist to help families to improve the diet and physical activity levels of their children?
  3. What are the dietary habits of young children and barriers to healthy eating?
  4. What are the activity patterns of young children and barriers to physical activity?
  5. What is the difference in health status of people who engage in a more traditional lifestyle and those who do not?



Canada Day Celebration in Chisasibi, July 2002



Elder in Mistissini preparing Sturgeon fish for smoking, July 2003



Map of the nine Cree Nations of James Bay, Quebec

## Methodology

We are using an ethnographic approach to understand the James Bay Cree's concept of health and well-being and how it relates to their current health status. An ethnography describes a culture and how cultural systems influence human behaviour. Data was obtained through:

1. **Key informant interviews** with members of Chief and Council, community health professionals who were employees of the Cree Health Board, community members working in Education, Public Health, Recreation, and Child Services, and other residents who consented to speak with us.
2. **Radio Phone-ins** at the local radio stations. These stations are a vital communication resource and link for the northern communities and provide an important outlet for gathering and distributing information. We participated in a segment of the "Health Program" at the Chisasibi Radio Station.
3. **Direct Observations of Behaviour** provided insights into the normal physical activity levels and eating patterns of the community.
4. **Community Mapping** documented existing community resources that could be utilized to promote physical activity and healthy eating.



James Makokis and Lily Napash (Community Nutrition Collaborator) at Radio Station in Chisasibi for Health Program, June 2003



Community Nutritionist at Nutrition Workshop in Mistissini with mother and daughter participants, July 2003

\*Student funding provided by Alberta ACADRE Network

@Supported by the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay

## Results

We are in the initial phase of data analysis. 41 participants were interviewed in total. Preliminary thematic results identified thus far include:

- Larger ('high weight') children are often viewed as healthier and/or more desirable than thinner ('average weight') children.
- Increased consumption of energy dense, low nutrient type foods ("junk food") amongst children.
- Decreased consumption of traditional/game ("country" or "bush") food and adoption of a market-food diet amongst children and some adults.
- Decreased physical activity levels amongst children due in part to increased television and video game exposure. Loss of traditional physical activities.
- Reclamation of traditional culture in each community by supporting cultural programs in schools and local events.

## Conclusions

- The majority of participants identified community education on nutrition and physical activity that makes use of existing community resources as necessary.
- Revival of traditional dietary practices & physical activities are key priorities for each community and are recognized as health promoting behaviours. It is important to regain these traditional activities not only for the physical well being of Cree people, but also the emotional, spiritual, and psychological well being of these communities.

## Further Work

Additional phases of this research will examine:

- Dietary habits of children using dietary questionnaires.
- Physical activity patterns of children.
- Use of anthropometric measures to determine if weight of children is appropriate for height and to evaluate body composition.
- Documentation of a lexicon of Cree terms related to obesity and overweight.
- Potential partnerships with local schools.

