

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Indigenous Brain Health: Social and Cultural Factors

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

Dementia affects over 55 million people around the world. This number will rise to 139 million people by 2050. Indigenous populations are more likely to develop dementia compared to non-Indigenous populations. The reason for this is not fully understood; however, most research on dementia in Indigenous populations focuses on individual risk and protective factors. More research is required to understand how social and cultural factors impact brain health and dementia in Indigenous populations.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Colonization impacts the brain health of Indigenous Peoples. Research on brain health and dementia must include a focus on how colonial systems and structures impact Indigenous health. Additionally, dementia care for Indigenous Peoples must be grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and include collaboration, culture, family, community, respect, and trauma-informed care.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

We conducted a scoping review of published research using specified search terms. Articles were included in our review if they: focused on an Indigenous population; focused on brain health; explored social and cultural factors; and were written in English. In total, we found 661 articles. Following a closer review of the articles using our inclusion criteria, a total of 23 articles were included in our final review.

Together, our team reviewed the final 23 articles using a Nominal Group Technique. This technique is a structured, small group discussion used to brainstorm, organize, and identify themes. Next, we used the Knowledge-Attitudes-Behaviour model as our framework for organizing behavior change theory for health audiences. The purpose of this was to understand the implications of our findings for healthcare practitioners.

WHO ARE WE?

We are a team of Indigenous and allied scholars and research associates located across what is now known as Canada, all affiliated with the Canadian Consortium on Neurodegeneration in Aging (CCNA) Team 18. With several Indigenous co-authors, we address an erasure bias in Western scientific approaches that often minimize consideration of social and cultural factors to health and disease outcomes.



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WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

In our scoping review, 15 articles identified social factors that impact brain health for Indigenous Peoples including:

- Smoking, physical inactivity, education, employment, and income
- Colonization, institutional racism, and trauma
- Climate change, traditional food, urban migration, family structure, and community

Additionally, 11 articles highlighted cultural factors that impact Indigenous brain health including:

- Cultural perspectives of dementia
- Non-traditional ways of living
- Inappropriate diagnoses and management tools
- Lack of culture in the healthcare system
- Lack of personalized support including community and family

A connection to culture is critical for brain health within Indigenous communities. The path to decolonization for brain health supports and care for Indigenous Peoples is to emphasize the strength of connection to culture. Recognizing that cultural understandings of brain health and dementia may vary among Indigenous communities is imperative when developing appropriate responses.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS?

To design high quality brain health and dementia care for Indigenous Peoples that is culturally safe and appropriate, talk with Indigenous peoples themselves. Acknowledge the role of colonization, listen to their experiences, and work on building authentic relationships with Indigenous communities.

Future research must recognize that health and wellness go beyond the Western biomedical model. This will help address the impact of social and cultural factors of brain health for Indigenous Peoples.

ABOUT THIS SNAPSHOT

The full research article can be found at:

Henderson, R., Furlano, J. A., Claringbold, S. S., Cornect-Benoit, A., Ly, A., Walker, J., Zaretsky, L., & Roach, P. (2024). Colonial drivers and cultural protectors of brain health among Indigenous peoples internationally. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12, 1346753–1346753.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1346753>

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