

Evidence Brief

Systematic review to inform prevention and management of chronic disease for Indigenous Australians: overview and priorities

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<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1753-6405.12476/abstract>

Systematic reviews are widely recognised as useful tools for providing decision makers with evidence to inform and enhance health care practice and policy. We conducted an overview of systematic reviews to describe the main characteristics of systematic reviews addressing questions about prevalence, prevention and management of chronic disease and related risk factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

We identified fourteen systematic reviews, which suggests that systematic reviews have to date been underutilised as a tool for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health. Seven of these reviews addressed questions about health intervention effectiveness, five of which related to the effectiveness of one or more interventions to help people quit smoking. A further four reviews focused on the prevalence of chronic disease or the risk factors associated with chronic disease, while the remainder dealt with a range of questions including the barriers and facilitators associated with implementing interventions designed to prevent or manage chronic disease. In addition we found that:

- eight conducted critical appraisal as per best practice;
- three reported steps taken to align the review process with the unique standards for conducting ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
- there has been significant variation in the types of studies considered for inclusion in the review, with most (8/14) considering both qualitative and quantitative evidence and only a few (3/14) including expert opinion.

Finally, we also found that there was limited coverage in relation to the range of chronic diseases and risk factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people considered. The majority of reviews addressed questions relating to either diabetes or asthma.

Recommendations from the systematic overview

- Critical appraisal of studies included in reviews is important to ensure that their findings are appropriately interpreted and used.
- Systematic review should be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers with relevant cultural and contextual knowledge in order to ensure validity of review findings.
- Reviewers should include commercial and grey literature and consider mixed evidence.
- Improved systematic review guidance, tools and reporting standards, tailored to the unique values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are needed to promote the relevance of systematic reviews.
- More high quality primary research, particularly intervention research, that addresses questions identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders as priorities to inform better chronic disease prevention and management, is important.