



Not all Tribes Have a Tradition of Tobacco Use

There are 563 federally recognized Indian tribes in the US, all with their own distinct culture, traditions, languages, values and teachings. It is important to remember that the information written here is a generalization, and each tribe and tribal member will have their own attitudes towards tobacco, and some tribes have no traditional connection with tobacco

Use of the word “tobacco” can be confusing. In reality, many of the traditional plants used by Indian tribes are not what we know as tobacco today. *Nicotiana tabacum*, the plant used in commercial tobacco, is not traditional tobacco. For example, the tobacco used by the Dakota is actually red willow bark.

Examples of the diversity of the word “tobacco” in Native languages:

asema	Anishinaabe
qačgal	Klamath
cansasa	Dakota
da nee	Ho-Chunk
xojim	Hupa
nat’oh	Navajo
arareheeraha	Karuk

The Urban American Indian Tobacco Prevention & Education Network (UAITPEN) is a part of the Oregon Tobacco Prevention & Education Program, providing culturally relevant tobacco education and prevention services to urban American Indians and Alaskan Natives.

The UAITPEN is housed at the Native American Rehabilitation Association of the Northwest (NARA). Founded in 1970 in Portland, Oregon, NARA is an Indian-owned, Indian-operated, non-profit agency.

The mission of NARA is to provide education, physical and mental health services and substance abuse treatment that is culturally appropriate to American Indians, Alaskan Natives and other vulnerable people. For more information about NARA, visit www.naranorthwest.org.



Urban American Indian Tobacco Prevention & Education Network

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Traditional Tobacco



Tobacco—Keep it Sacred

For most tribes, only certain people were allowed to use tobacco, such as shamans and healers, and they followed very specific teachings for the growing, harvesting and use of tobacco.



Elders teach that tobacco is the first plant the creator gave to Native people. Three other plants, sage,

cedar and sweet grass, follow tobacco, and together they are referred to as the four sacred medicines. When used properly, sacred tobacco can be used to communicate to the Spirit World and to the Creator. Offering sacred tobacco is a way of giving thanks in advance of a request. Whenever there is a request for guidance, advice, ceremonies or taking from the animal or spirit world, sacred tobacco is always offered first.

Medicinal Uses



Tobacco has been used for a variety of health ailments throughout history by American Indian tribes, including:

Asthma	Rheumatism
Chills	Fevers
Headaches	Earaches
Toothaches	Childbirth pains
Stomachaches	Open wounds

Traditional Tobacco vs. Commercial Tobacco

Traditional tobacco is the original, gifted and sacred tobacco of Native tribes. It is strictly for spiritual, cultural and ceremonial use, and it ensures the continuance of the Native way of life. This type of tobacco is grown or traded for spiritual and/or medicinal use.



Flowering tobacco plant

Commercial tobacco is manufactured tobacco, sold for a profit for recreational and habitual use. This type of use can cause addiction, death and disease. Commercial tobacco can come in the form of cigarettes, pipe tobacco, roll-your-own, cigars, bidis, chewing tobacco, snuff, snus, etc. It includes brands such as Camel, Marlboro, Natural American Spirits, Top, Redman, and many more.

There are no known adverse health effects associated with sacred or ceremonial use of traditional plants.

Ceremonial Uses

Tobacco has been traditionally used in ceremony by many North American tribes. Many of these uses do not include any burning of the tobacco at all. Tobacco can be used:

- To honor and welcome guests
- To bless food crops
- To communicate with the Creator or Spirit World
- To ensure the welfare of the people
- To bless the hunt
- To bind agreements between tribes
- As payment to a Healer

Traditional or ceremonial tobacco can be used in different ways. It can be used as an offering to the earth or fire; it is held in the hand and not smoked when used this way. Tobacco can be smoked in a sacred pipe, usually only inhaled into the mouth and released to the air, not inhaled into the body; the smoke is meant to carry prayers to the Creator, not to be ingested.

Also, tobacco is often mixed with other herbs when smoked, such as bear berry, mullen, red willow bark, osha root, etc., and the mixture may not contain any actual tobacco at all.



Keep it Traditional