Interior Health

Traditional Indigenous Healing Practices at Interior Health



Indigenous Partnerships

August 2026



Interior Health (IH) remains committed to honoring the values and cultural practices of Indigenous clients, visitors, staff and volunteers throughout our health-care system.

IH services 72, 095 Indigenous, Métis and Inuit peoples within the region. This population is made up of 7 Host Nations comprised of the Tŝilhqot'in, Secwépemc, Dãkelh Dené, St'át'imc, syilx, Nlaka'pamux, and Ktunaxa Nations and their 54 First Nations communities, 14 Chartered Métis communities and 9 Urban and Away-from-Home Indigenous organizations – making it one of the largest Indigenous populations for a B.C. health authority.

In 2026, IH's Guideline for Smudging in IH Facilities (originally published in 2014) was adapted into the formal Traditional Indigenous Healing Practices (AD1000) policy. This policy aligns with IH's strategic priority to advance Indigenous health and wellness. It is an important step in achieving goals identified in the IH Indigenous Health & Wellness Strategy 2022-2026. The Traditional Indigenous Healing Practices (TIHP) policy strengthens IH's commitment to culturally safe and inclusive care for Indigenous clients.

Under the new policy, Indigenous clients are supported to access and practice traditional Indigenous healing practices such as smudging and pipe ceremonies not only in designated Sacred Spaces within IH facilities but also at a clients' bedside (some exceptions may apply e.g.: operating rooms, procedural suites, and hyperbaric environments). The TIHP policy focuses on smoke-producing ceremonies to mitigate various challenges within IH facilities (e.g.: smoke detectors, allergies, etc.)

> "When we are at our most vulnerable, in hospital care, we need to have our medicines and ceremonies with us."
> - Late Elder Bucky John, St'át'imc

Learn More

Policies | Interior Health

- AD1000 Traditional Indigenous Healing Practices
- AD0200 Indigenous Cultural Safety & Humility
- AV2000 Smoke Free Environment

What is smudging?

Smudging is an Indigenous ceremony involving the burning of substance(s) to make a cleansing smoke and is practiced amongst most Indigenous peoples in North America. There are variances from place to place, but it is generally a ceremony for purification for the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical selves and surrounding environments. Smudging can be done several times a day or utilized during especially challenging times – this includes when we experience great sadness, pain or trauma.

> "I use smudging and prayer for myself, my family/ community when going through hardships such as grieving. We need to be able to utilize our traditional practices within our health care system in a respectful way because they haven't been respected in the past. In every aspect of our life, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, we use prayer and smudging".
>
> - Shannon McDonald "Ti7na Lósi", St'at'imc

Various medicinal plants are used to make a smudge or cleansing smoke, most commonly using raw ceremonial tobacco, sage, cedar and sweetgrass, juniper and several other Nation-specific substances. These traditional practices have proven repeatedly to be invaluable to the healing, health, wellness and recovery of Indigenous clients.

Click the link to watch IH's video about smudging:

Interior Health Traditional Indigenous Healing Practices

Ceremonial smoke within IH facilities

When Indigenous peoples are in hospital, they are at their most vulnerable and having to mitigate difficult historical and present-day challenges within the health care system. Issues of inequity, racism and discrimination are factors that lend to Indigenous clients feeling unsafe and hesitant to access health care services.



Bringing traditional wellness practices into Indigenous clients health journeys within IH is pivotal to advancing reconciliation efforts and supporting overall Indigenous health. It is a means of revitalizing Indigenous traditions and incorporating equity within the health care system.

Modern research studies have shown that the smoke from smudging with sage is not harmful:

Medicinal smoke reduces airborne bacteria - PubMed

CSC smudging toxicity: testing - NRC Publications Archive - Canada.ca

Smoke from smudging with sage and other medicines is known to have anti-bacterial and anti-fungal properties that would benefit a clients' personal self as well as their physical space. During pipe ceremonies, smoldering raw tobacco does not emit the same toxic substances as commercial tobacco.

I am allergic to smoke from sage but would like a spiritual cleansing

There are many forms of Indigenous spiritual cleansing used throughout the interior. You or your family may choose to access other traditional Indigenous healing practices including; medicine baths and/or brushings.

Please discuss your family's preferences and plans with your care team and Interior Health staff will work to support your needs on a case-by-case basis. Families must provide their own medicines/tools.

* **Medicine bath** is where clients are provided with traditional Indigenous medicines to be added to a water source (e.g.: bathtub, spray bottle) and used for spiritual cleansing.

* **Brushing** is where traditional Indigenous medicines, feathers or feather fans are used in spiritual cleansing ceremony.

How do I access Traditional medicines while under IH's care?

Most IH hospitals have an Indigenous Patient Navigator (IPN) that is available to help coordinate smudging or other traditional healing ceremonies. Please ask your care team to speak to an IPN or Charge Nurse so they can assist you in your ceremonial needs.

It is important to note:

- Even if you have access to your own medicine, the IPN or your Charge Nurse still needs to be informed and included in the plan to facilitate a smoke-producing ceremony within IH facilities.
- **DO NOT LIGHT ANY MEDICINES WITHOUT YOUR CARE TEAM KNOWING AND SUPPORTING.**
- Inform the IPN or Charge Nurse if or when you have an elder or another person coming to assist with your ceremony. IH recognizes these helpers as Essential Care Providers and works with them to support your health and wellness journey while under IH's care.
- If you need help accessing traditional medicines, the IPN or your Charge Nurse will assist where possible. Some IH hospitals may have access to a small supply if needed for emergency situations.



Once your IPN or Charge Nurse knows of your need to ceremony, they will;

- Review your charts to assess if smoke-producing medicines will compromise your health or safety.
- Verify no one near the ceremony site has an allergy to the smoke
- Require adequate time to plan for, accommodate or move clients and staff that have allergies. Some restrictions may apply.
- Act in a manner to prevent smoke alarms from going off.

- In the event alarms go off, they must contact IH facility maintenance staff to turn off smoke detectors/ sprinklers, etc.
- Place signs on the door so people know why they are smelling smoke.
- Send out a computer system alert informing other nurses on the floor of your ceremony so they will not be concerned.
- We recognize it is important to access traditional Indigenous healing practices in a timely manner and do our best to accommodate as quickly as possible.

By keeping these responsibilities in mind and working with your IH Health Care team, we can support continued Traditional Indigenous Healing Practices and medicines when they are needed the most.

Why do we need to make space for traditional Indigenous healing practices, in IH facilities?

The following legislations and commitments guide this work;

- Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of Canada's: Calls to Action,
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) &
- BC's Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA) Action Plan,
- Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls,
- In Plain Sight Report,
- BC Cultural Safety & Humility Standard.
- IH Indigenous Health and Wellness strategy
- IH Métis Health and Wellness strategy
- IH Indigenous Mental Health and Wellness strategy

All the above recognize the inherent right of Indigenous people to access their traditional healing practices as part of their health journey with IH.

> The medicines we use are the medicines of this land; they come from nowhere else. The teachings tied to the medicines have been handed down since the time of Creation, the use of these are essential to the health of us as people and to the land that sustains us.
>
> -Lenora Starr, St'át'imc - Indigenous Cultural Safety Practice Lead, Indigenous Partnerships, Interior Health.

The Interior region is home to the traditional, ancestral and unceded territories of the Tŝilhqot'in, Secwépemc, Dãkelh Dené, St'át'imc, Syilx, Nlaka'pamux, and Ktunaxa Nations,

There are 14 Métis Chartered Communities and 9 Urban and Away from Home Indigenous organizational communities living within the IH region.