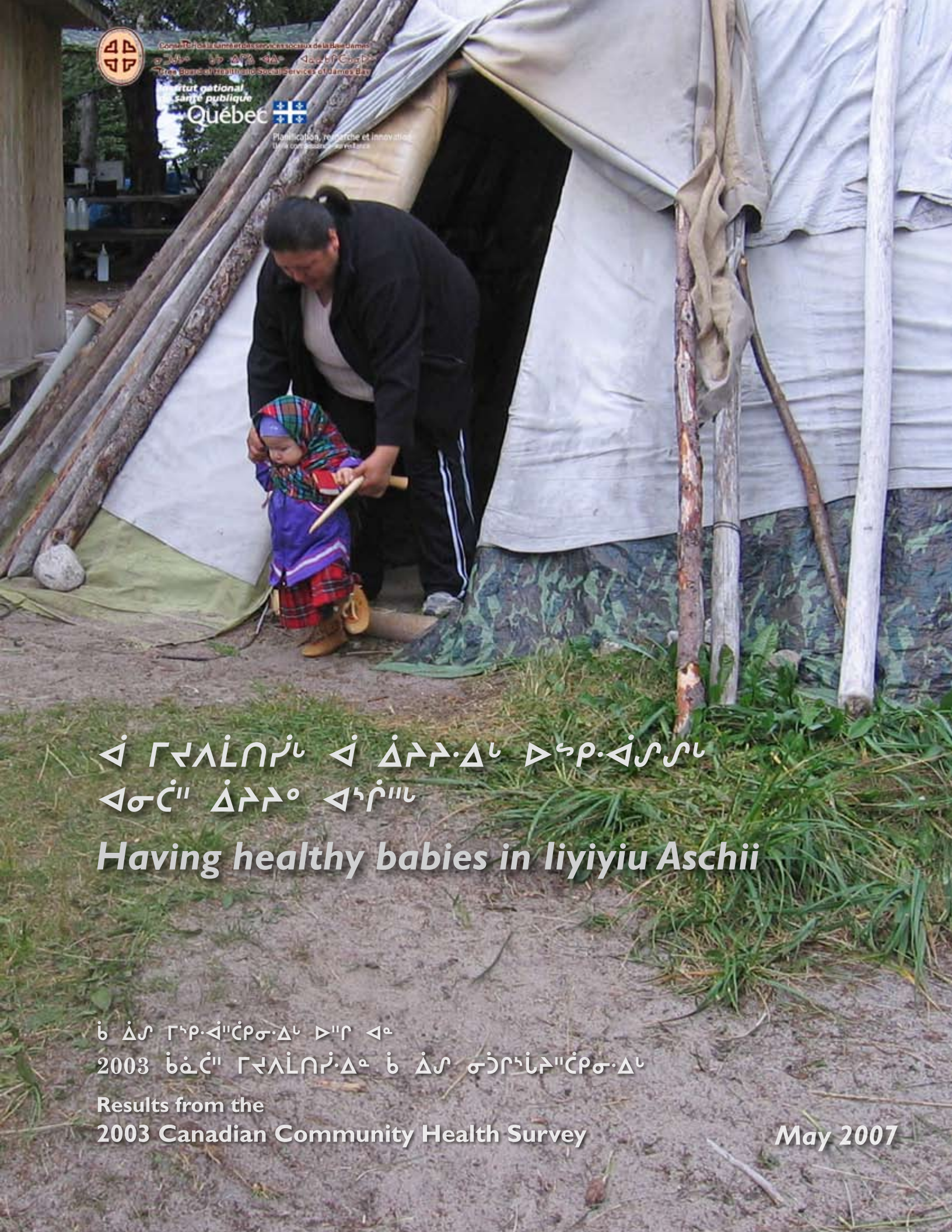




Centre for Health and Social Services of the Inuit of Quebec  
 Centre de santé et des services sociaux des Inuits du Québec

Institut national  
 de la santé publique  
 Québec

Planification, recherche et innovation  
 Health planning, research and innovation



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*Having healthy babies in liyiyiu Aschii*

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Results from the  
 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey

May 2007



## Having healthy babies in liyiyiu Aschii

May 2007

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This report is a summary of a longer paper entitled *Preventive practices and changes for improving health*.

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# Introduction

*“When you’re pregnant, the baby is a separate spirit. What you think, what you feel, what you do and what you eat will affect the new spirit.”*

## Elder's teaching, Yukon<sup>1</sup>

Pregnancy is a time when women are ready to make healthy changes, for their own sake and for the sake of the unborn baby. Women can do many things to give their baby a strong start. Even before the child is conceived, they can prepare for a healthy pregnancy by taking folic acid. While they are pregnant, and during the first months of life, they can avoid harmful things like alcohol or cigarette smoke. And they can help their new babies to stay healthy by breastfeeding them. In 2003, a survey in Iijiyu Aschii asked women who had given birth in the past five years about the things they had done to have a healthy baby. Here is what these women told the survey.

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## The earliest step: folic acid

In the very first month of pregnancy, the stage is already being set for some parts of a baby's brain and spinal cord to form. Cells that will turn into the brain and spinal cord are being created in a structure called the *neural tube*. Once in a while, something goes wrong with the process. This gives the baby a *neural tube defect* (a brain or spine that is not formed right). This is less likely to happen if the mother has enough folic acid in her diet.

To help prevent neural tube defects, health workers advise women to take extra folic acid if there is any chance that they will get pregnant. That way, they already have enough folic acid in their bodies in the first month, when they may not even know they are pregnant yet. Even if they didn't take folic acid before getting pregnant, women should start taking it as early in their pregnancy as they can.

### Did You Know?

*Folic acid is a kind of vitamin. It is in fruits and vegetables. In Canada, it is also added to some flour, pasta, and cornmeal. But most women still do not get enough, especially in the north where fruits and vegetables are hard to find. This is why some women take extra folic acid pills if they think they might get pregnant.*

In Iiyiyiu Aschii, one mother in three took folic acid during her last pregnancy. This is about the same as in other parts of Quebec. Ideally, more women should be taking folic acid. Women who don't eat many fruits and vegetables need to be extra careful about folic acid.

## Protecting the unborn baby from alcohol

Babies whose mothers drink while they are pregnant can be born with serious physical and mental problems. Most mothers in Iiyiyiu Aschii (85%) avoid drinking while they are pregnant. But some of the younger mothers (under 25) are not as careful: one young mother in four drinks while she is pregnant. Most of the women who drink during their pregnancies

(57%) do so only once in a while (once a month or less), but some mothers drink more often.

Compared to other women in Quebec, mothers in Iiyiyiu Aschii are about as likely to drink while pregnant as anyone else. But the younger women in Iiyiyiu Aschii are more likely to drink than young moms in other parts of the province.

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## Protecting the baby from tobacco smoke

Cigarette smoke can hurt babies, both while they are in their mother's womb and after birth. Babies whose mothers smoke while they are pregnant may be born smaller and less healthy. Infants who have to breathe second-hand smoke are more likely to get problems like:

- ◆ ear infections
- ◆ asthma
- ◆ lungs that don't work as well as they should

### Protecting unborn babies from tobacco

In Iiyiu Aschii, about a third of all mothers smoke while they are pregnant. Young mothers (15-24) are especially likely to do this: over half of them smoke during their pregnancies. On the other hand, more educated women are less likely to smoke.

The good news is that many women stop smoking when they get pregnant (or even before). Over half the mothers who used to smoke had stopped by the time they got pregnant. And they did not smoke while they were breastfeeding either. We think this means that when women quit smoking because they are pregnant, they "stay quit" for a long time, maybe forever.

### Protecting newborn babies from tobacco

Babies can be exposed to tobacco in two ways:

1. If a mother smokes during the months that she is breastfeeding, she will pass on bad chemicals to her baby in her breast milk. And if she smokes around the baby, the child will have to breathe second-hand smoke.
2. Also, if other people smoke around the mother and her baby, they will both have to breathe second-hand smoke.

How many babies were put at risk in these ways? A lot of women who used to smoke gave it up while they were pregnant or breastfeeding. But some kept smoking: all told, about a third of mothers smoked during the time they were breastfeeding, although we don't know if they smoked around the baby. Besides this, almost one mother in three regularly had to breathe someone else's second-hand smoke. If her baby was with her at the time, then the child would also have had to breathe the smoke. Younger mothers (under 25) were almost twice as likely as older women to have to breathe someone's second-hand smoke.







## Getting the new baby off to a strong start: breastfeeding

Breast milk is better for the baby than formula. Health Canada says that babies should be breastfed for at least two years. It also says they should get only breast milk for the first six months—no juice, formula, or solid foods. This helps the child grow up strong, with less risk of stomach problems, coughs and colds, and allergies. It is also good for the mother. Women who breastfeed are less likely to get osteoporosis (fragile bones) and some women's cancers.

### Starting by breastfeeding

In Iiyiyiu Aschii, like the rest of Quebec, eight out of ten mothers begin by breastfeeding their newborn. More women are breastfeeding than before: in 1991, only six out of ten women in Iiyiyiu Aschii breastfed their babies. Younger mothers, and those who are more educated, are most likely to breastfeed their babies

Why do the remaining women choose not to breastfeed? About half of them have medical reasons; like that the child was born premature (too early) or was ill. A few women think that they should not breastfeed if they had a C-section. The rest could probably breastfeed if they wanted to, but they say things like they:

- ♦ find breastfeeding unappealing
- ♦ feel a bottle is easier
- ♦ think formula is better for the baby
- ♦ need to go back to work or school

Although most mothers in Iiyiyiu Aschii breastfeed their babies, few of them do so

*"Breastfed babies are cuddly people."*

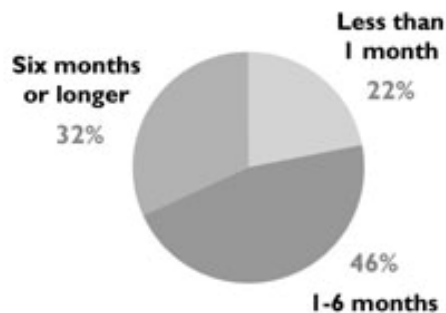
Jane Dragon, N.W.T.<sup>1</sup>

for long enough. A quarter of the women who begin breastfeeding stop within a month, and three quarters have stopped by the time the baby is six months old (see figure). Young mothers are especially likely to stop breastfeeding after a short while. The most common reasons for stopping are problems like not having enough milk, feeling tired, or finding it inconvenient. Some women also wean the child so they can go back to work or school.

### Giving the new baby nothing but breast milk

Compared to women in other parts of Quebec, those in Iiyiyiu Aschii are more likely to give their child only breast milk for the first six months, as Health Canada suggests. Even so, just a quarter of the mothers in Iiyiyiu Aschii give their baby only breast milk for the first six months. Younger mothers, and those with more education, are most likely to do this.

How long do mothers in Iiyiyiu Aschii breastfeed their babies?



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## Summary

Many mothers in liyiyu Aschii are taking steps to help their babies be born healthy, but there is still room for progress. For instance, only one mother in three takes folic acid during her pregnancy. But most women avoid alcohol while they are pregnant. Also, many women who used to smoke seem to stop when they get pregnant. Even so, one mother in three still smokes while she is pregnant or breastfeeding, and about the same proportion often have to breathe someone else's second-hand smoke. Mothers in liyiyu Aschii are more likely to breastfeed than before. Ideally, though, they should

breastfeed for longer than they do, and avoid giving their babies other food beside breast milk in the first six months.

Younger mothers (under age 25) seem to have different habits. As compared to older women, young moms are more likely to drink while they are pregnant. They are also more likely to smoke, and to be exposed to second-hand smoke. And while most of them begin breastfeeding, many give it up after a short while. However, the young mothers who stick with breastfeeding do better than others at giving the child only breast milk for the first six months.



