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Minority Report: Black Women, Latinas Face Higher HD Risks, Don't Trust Doctors

The statistics are pretty sobering. African-American women are 35% more likely to die of heart disease than white women, while Hispanic women face heart disease nearly ten years earlier on average. Even Asian and Pacific Islander women, long considered to be at very low risk for heart disease, still count heart disease as their second leading cause of death.

Obesity, high cholesterol, poverty, language barriers, physical inactivity, and lack of information all contribute to increased risk factors for women of color. A recent study found that minority patients may have poorer health because of disparities in health care, while another found that minority women were more likely to mistrust their health care provider. It's a double-whammy that makes it difficult for these women to gain control over their heart disease risk.

Dr. Jennifer H Mieres, Director of Nuclear Cardiology at the New York University School of Medicine and author of *Heart Smart for Black Women and Latinas*, feels that doctors need to develop a partnership with their patients. "I think that effective communication is key," says Dr. Mieres. "Health care professionals need to take the time to translate medical terminology into an understandable format so that patients can easily understand their medical problems."

Lack of trust was the main focus of the study done by Michigan State University researchers, who found that almost 70% of minority women felt that medical organizations sometimes "deceive or mislead" their patients. While the study was specifically looking at factors that prevent women from getting breast cancer screenings, researchers found that this general mistrust translated to decreased health screenings across the board. Dr. Karen Patricia Williams, lead author of the study, expressed concern that patients feel that they will not receive appropriate care based on race and ethnicity, saying "Everyone involved in the health-care experience needs to focus on respecting the patient and family, regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, insurance or lack thereof. We need to provide everyone with the same gold standard regardless of any other factors."

But before doctors can even create that gold standard, minority women need to be made aware of their risk. Statistics show that about 68% of white women know that heart disease is the leading killer of women, compared to only 31% of black women and 29% of Hispanic women. Dr. Mieres acknowledges that this lack of information is a real concern, although she is now seeing a positive trend among this specific population of

women: “I think the strategic awareness partnership with the media is in part responsible for the positive awareness trend — more information is becoming available in *Essence* and *Latina* magazines, along with Telemundo and Black Entertainment Television. This will only improve as more focused and targeted information is published in magazines and media outlets frequented by women of color.”

Besides lack of information, minority women may also face cultural challenges that make it difficult for them to make the necessary lifestyle changes that will improve their heart health. African-American and Hispanic women may find it difficult to stay away from fried foods that are high in cholesterol but have been a mainstay in their family’s diet for generations. Making time for exercise may also not be a priority — in fact, some 60% of Latinas report engaging in no physical exercise program at all.

Dr.Mieres advises making small heart-smart changes that can have a big impact:

- Five servings of fruits and vegetables per day
- Bake, don’t fry
- Two servings of fatty fish per week
- Be active every day: walking, dancing, jogging — start with 10 minutes every day and work up to 30 minutes, at least five days a week
- Maintain your traditional menus but make heart healthy substitutions
- Remove the salt shaker and use other spices and herbs to maintain the traditional flavors

It’s true that minority women can take control of their heart health in many small but significant ways. At the same time, the current economy may also have a far-reaching impact on the availability of quality health care as well as personal priorities for women juggling both financial and family concerns. “Now that we are facing unprecedented challenges in all areas from the recession,” says Dr. Mieres, “I am fearful that all women will continue to place themselves and health last on the list and not pay attention to their risk factors for heart disease — and therefore we can lose momentum on the progress that we have made. Don’t lose your momentum on your own road to heart health.”

For more information on minority women and heart health:

Heart Healthy Home Cooking African-American Style

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/other/chdblack/cooking.pdf>

Heart Healthy Latino Recipes

http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/other/sp_recip.pdf

Physicians May Face Challenging Workplace Conditions In Clinics Serving Minority Patients

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/02/090209163209.htm>

High Level Of Medical Mistrust Among Minority Women Impacts Quality Of Health Care

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/02/090205110612.htm>

U.S. Minority Women Know Less About Heart Disease

<http://www.lifeclinic.com/fullpage.aspx?prid=601636&type=1>