

More Research Needed on Breast Cancer In Black Women

By Michelle Meadows

Closing the Gap, Cancer • August 2000

African American women are more likely to die of breast cancer than any other racial and ethnic group. While White women are more likely to develop breast cancer, Black women have the highest death rate from the disease.

Being diagnosed at later stages is one factor, says Edwin T. Johnson, MD, author of the recently published second edition of the *Breast Cancer/Black Woman*, and director of the Montgomery Urgent Care and Diagnostic Center in Montgomery, AL.

"We've got to look for it earlier in black women," Dr. Johnson says. He starts annual screening mammograms for black women at age 30 in his practice. "Breast cancer in black women under 40 is twice as frequent as the rate for whites. In most instances, by age 40, the cancer has spread in black women."

The American Cancer Society recommends mammograms every year starting at age 40 for all women. The National Cancer Institute's (NCI) stance is that women in their 40s should have mammograms on a regular basis—every one to two years. NCI also recommends that women at higher risk seek medical advice for screening recommendations.

Whether Black women should have different mammogram screening guidelines than the general population needs further investigation, said Lovell Jones, PhD, co-founder of

the Intercultural Cancer Council, and professor and director of experimental gynecology and endocrinology at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

Dr. Jones is planning a summit for September 2000 that will bring together leading cancer researchers to explore such unanswered questions about breast cancer and black women. Topics will range from genetics to racism. The closed meeting will also include breast cancer survivors. Among the issues to be considered:

What are the differences in treatment?

Lack of access to care, especially lack of health insurance, is among the biggest problems for black women, according to Lucile Adams-Campbell, PhD, director of Howard University's Cancer Center and a professor of medicine. "Studies show that access to treatment might be very different for black women," she says, noting that mammogram screening rates are approaching the rates of white women.

Why are there differences in incidence?

"Access certainly plays a role in mortality, but there may be other factors involved with incidence," Dr. Jones said. "Why is breast cancer 50 percent higher in Black women under 35?" Breast cancer occurs about five to

10 years earlier in Black women than White women, and the incidence of breast cancer is also higher in premenopausal black women, he added. "This says something is going on that is not influenced by access."

Is breast cancer more aggressive in Black women?

When breast cancer is discovered in black and white women at the same stage, is it more aggressive? Dr. Jones says "there are studies that have pointed to breast cancer being more aggressive in black women, but there are not a volume of such studies." Experts say breast cancer in African American women may be more likely to be estrogen-receptor negative. Estrogen receptor negative tumors tend to be more aggressive, Dr. Jones explains. That means drugs that block estrogen aren't as effective and the tumors are more difficult to treat.

The September meeting will address many questions and result in a report of findings and recommendations. The meeting is receiving financial support from NCI, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, Columbia University's African American Breast Cancer Project, Ortho-Biotech, and Amgen. Sponsors include the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Center, and Howard University Health Sciences Center.

Breast Cancer Rates by Race and Ethnicity

Incidence (Rate of new cases)

Whites: 113.2 per 100,000 women
Blacks: 99.3 per 100,000
Asian/Pacific Islander: 72.6 per 100,000
Hispanic: 69.4 per 100,000
American Indian: 33.9 per 100,000

Mortality (Death rate)

Blacks: 31.4 per 100,000
Whites: 25.7 per 100,000
Hispanics: 15.3 per 100,000
American Indians: 12.3 per 100,000
Asian/Pacific Islander: 11.4 per 100,000



Source: Cancer Facts & Figures 2000, American Cancer Society.

