

research snapshot

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African American Women Have a Disadvantage When it Comes to Cancer Care

What is this research about?

Research shows that when it comes to breast cancer care and survival, African American women have a disadvantage compared to non-Hispanic white women. It has been suggested that there are biological reasons for this disparity. But it has also been argued that social and economic factors play a role. Indeed, some researchers have found a link between a lack of health insurance and later cancer diagnoses, lack of access to treatment, and poorer survival. And African Americans, because of their socioeconomic status, often don't have the health insurance coverage they need.

The last generation has seen great leaps in breast cancer care. But have these advances been enjoyed by all equitably?

What did the researchers do?

A team of researchers in Ontario and Detroit looked at 25,997 breast cancer care cases in Detroit. They compared the experiences of African American women and non-white Hispanic women. They also compared older Medicare-eligible and younger non-eligible women. Two cohorts – one spanning 1975 to 1980, the other 1990 to 1995 – were followed.

What you need to know:

Race has an impact on breast cancer treatment and survival. Non-Hispanic white women are more likely to survive breast cancer than African American women. Younger women are especially vulnerable. They tend to lack adequate health insurance.

What did the researchers find?

Non-Hispanic white women with breast cancer are much more likely to survive for five years than African American women. This is especially true for young African American women who are not yet Medicare-eligible. When comparing older African American women and older white women, the divide has not increased significantly. But a divide still exists.

African American women with breast cancer have not fully benefited from recent advances in cancer care. They appear to be more disadvantaged today than they were a generation ago. Younger women, especially, are disadvantaged; they are much more likely to be inadequately insured. Although biological differences should not be ignored, they probably cannot explain the disparities between the way African American and white women experience breast cancer care.

How can you use this research?

This research may be of interest to researchers, policymakers, and healthcare workers. Policymakers should note that factors like race play a role in shaping women's access to health care.

About the Researchers

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Citation

Gorey, K., et al. (2009). Increased racial differences on breast cancer care and survival in America: Historical evidence consistent with a health insurance hypothesis 1975-2001. *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment*, 113(3), 595-600.

Available online at <http://1.usa.gov/1irbx1h>

Keywords

Breast cancer, Social determinants of health, Race, African American women

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York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

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