

Women's Health Week

Obesity, dental disease, HIV/AIDS epidemic are major health issues for African American women

by Aisha Jefferson

May 12, 2008 -- As National Women's Health Week (May 11-17) kicked off, a lack of healthcare insurance, inaccessibility to proper information, and other socioeconomic barriers continue to take a toll on the overall health of black women, according to medical experts and professionals who participated in the National Black Women's Health Conference held last week.

The three-day event at The Westin Peachtree Plaza in Atlanta was organized by Atlanta-based *Black Health* magazine. Sessions focused on health, beauty and lifestyle matters and major health issues among African American women, namely obesity, dental disease, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and breast cancer. The conference also served to bring about awareness to National Women's Health Week.

"Traditionally, African American women have been the ones to hold the family together and have always been the ones to take care of others, as a consequence her own health fails," says Marcus D. Oaks, executive director of the conference and publisher of *Black Health* magazine. "We thought it would be helpful to give African American women the opportunity to have a conference" where they could be proactive and communicate with others, he says.

A major issue of concern as it relates to African Women and their health is obesity. The problem is "getting continuously worse for African Americans and Mexican Americans," says cardiologist Lynne V. Perry-Bottinger, an assistant professor of clinical medicine at Columbia University and assistant professor of medicine at Cornell University. She adds that that 80% of African American women are overweight, while 50% are obese.

There is a direct correlation between obesity and heart disease, Perry-Bottinger says, noting that 42% of the deaths among black women are due to heart disease. As a result of the dangers associated with obesity, Perry-Bottinger foresees increased scrutiny in the insurance industry about whether to offer or continue coverage. "It's going to be expensive to offer them health insurance because they are [considered] too risky," she says. Health insurance premiums are based on an individual's health history, among other aspects.

Obesity doesn't have to be death sentence. It is the second most preventable cause of death after smoking, Perry-Bottinger says. Sleep deprivation, a diet high in foods with saturated fat, and a lack of universal healthcare are all contributing factors. Preventive methods include regular doctor visits, daily exercise, knowing body-mass-index or ratio of weight to height, obtaining a cholesterol profile, monitoring blood pressure, eating three square meals daily, and getting proper rest.

"You really have to work at being healthy. Do the things you need to do to be healthy as the first things you do each day," advises Dr. Jewel L. Crawford, an instructor of community health at Morehouse School of Medicine. During her conference session on HIV/AIDS, Crawford decided to put statistical data aside and get "right down to the real nitty-gritty." She asked attendees to cite reasons contributing to the spread of this virus among African American women, who in 2005 accounted for 64% of the 126,964 women living with HIV/AIDS in this country, compared with 19% for white women and 15% for Hispanic women, according to the CDC.

"I think that in addition to looking at statistics, we need to look at the emotional aspects and how we're feeling," Crawford told the group of women. The 20 or so responses given included low self-esteem, breakdown of the black family dynamic, change of value system since integration, socioeconomic conditions, the "down-low" factor among bisexual black men, and lack of cultural competency in health education.

With CDC data showing HIV infection as the leading cause of death for African-American women ages 25-34, "we don't have the luxury of limiting our efforts to the two Ps: pontificating and the pamphlets," says Crawford, explaining that this approach hasn't worked well within the black community because rates of infection have continued to climb. While African Americans comprised 13% of the U.S. population, they accounted for 49% of all new cases of HIV/AIDS in 2005, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Instead, Crawford says public health officials need to do more outreach and "go to the people with this information," communicating with them at a level they'd understand. "There is an apparent collective depression as well as hopelessness among some segments of the black community that correlates with self-destructive and risky sexual behavior," she says. "This is also a factor contributing to high levels of violence in our community." The attitude is "you take a chance-so what, you're going to die anyway," Crawford explains.

In addition to getting tested for HIV, attendees were encouraged to get an annual physical examination, including a pap smear, to determine their vaginal health and identify any harmful STDs including human papilloma virus, or HPV, which is linked to genital warts and cervical cancer. A 2007 analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation shows that African American women and Hispanic women were 1.5 times more likely to develop cervical cancer than white women and are more likely to die as a result.

Another health concern affecting African Americans that sometimes is overlooked is periodontal disease, which attacks the gum and bone around the teeth and is the leading cause of tooth loss. Periodontal disease is more prevalent in African Americans than any other group, says Shai Hall, a general and cosmetic dentist at The Dental Spa in Marietta, Georgia. The mentality of "go to the dentists when there's a problem," is not enough because regular dental visits help to maintain overall dental health and avoid dental emergencies, she says. Poor dental health allows bacteria to travel through the blood stream and lends to susceptibility to other ailments such as heart disease, oral cancer, diabetes, and pregnancy difficulties, Hall adds.

Although African American women have a lower incident rate of breast cancer compared with white women, they have a higher mortality rate, according to the American Cancer Society. African American women are more likely than all other women to die from breast cancer because tumors are found at a later, more advanced stage so there are fewer treatment options, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Medical experts say detecting breast cancer early is important for survival. Early detection can be done through breast self exams, clinical breast exams by a health professional, and mammogram screening. The American Cancer Society recommends regular physical activity, which is associated with a lower risk of breast cancer.

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