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Breast Health Care for the African American Woman

By Christine W. Thorpe, MA, CHES

Breast cancer ranks as one of the top diseases that take the lives of African-American women. Compared to other racial/ethnic groups, African-American women are over two times more likely to die from breast cancer. In 2005 alone, the American Cancer Society estimates that 18.4% of African-American women will die from this disease. With all the information available and the research conducted on finding a cure for breast cancer, why are we still disproportionately dying?



These alarming figures exist for a number of reasons, many of which are in the control of our own hands. One reason is that African-American women either don't practice, or inconsistently partake in, comprehensive breast health care (CBHC). CBHC includes monthly breast self-examinations, an annual clinical examination performed by a medical professional, and mammography every year for women over the age of forty. By regularly following the necessary breast care regiment, we are likely to find abnormalities at an early stage which leads to a better prognosis. It is important to understand that what we don't know about our health will hurt us.

Limited health care services are yet additional reasons that are manifested through poor physician-patient relations and inadequate access. The distrust for medical professionals may enforce stronger reliance on religious beliefs and traditional remedies in healing ailments. Although faith is a positive contributor to our health, it is important to identify a health care provider who you trust and feel comfortable discussing your health concerns. Referrals from family and friends can assist in finding a provider who is culturally sensitive, knowledgeable and has your best interest at heart.

Another reason for this disparity is poor dietary practices. Studies have shown that overweight and obesity contribute to increased rates of breast cancer among African-American women, particularly after menopause. A low-fat diet with regular exercise can reduce the rate of breast cancer. The American Cancer Society recommends a diet high in fruits and vegetables, 30 minutes of moderate physical activity each day, and limited alcohol intake.

A final and very important reason for the disproportionate deaths to breast cancer is non-participation in genetic testing and clinical trials. Breast cancer in African-American women tends to be more aggressive than in white women, yet we are not participating in clinical trials that would help to find new treatments and a cure. Much of the existing data on breast cancer is derived from white women. Studies conducted by researchers at the UCLA Medical Center have found that African-American women with tumors were likely to have the BP1 gene, a mutation of the

BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, associated with aggressive breast cancer. By testing to see whether the gene mutations are present, and participating in clinical trials, African-American women can take proactive steps toward early detection of breast cancer.

Until there is a cure for breast cancer, the best protection is early detection.

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