

African Americans surviving beyond cancer

Written by National Cancer Institute
Wednesday, 18 July 2012 17:14



Editor's Note: *The following article is part of the Lifelines education and awareness series. More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines.*

More and more people in the United States are living for a long time after being diagnosed and treated for cancer. Survivorship begins when cancer is discovered, and it continues for a lifetime. It is focused on the quality of a patient's life and often involves family and others affected by a patient's cancer diagnosis. African American cancer survivors can experience a number of ongoing social, psychological, and financial challenges and concerns, some of which may be different from those experienced by whites. The quality of a patient's life can depend on identifying these problems early and addressing them effectively.

As a result of improved diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up care in recent decades, two in three adult cancer patients – and four in five children with cancer – will survive for at least 5 years after their diagnosis, and many will live long lives. Close to one million African Americans are now cancer survivors.

"Research in this area is becoming increasingly important as the number of cancer survivors grows," said Dr. Julia Rowland, Director of the National Cancer Institute's Office of Cancer Survivorship

Weight, Culture, and Breast Cancer

Dr. Melinda R. Stolley, at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has been studying the impact of

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diet and physical activity on the lives of African American cancer survivors. Although African American women are less likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer than white women, they are 39 percent more likely to die from it. Some of this difference may arise from differences in lifestyle factors after treatment. For example, one major study showed that approximately 82 percent of African American women are overweight or obese, compared to 58 percent of white women. Other studies suggest that African American women gain more weight than white women after being diagnosed with breast cancer.

Moving Forward

With support from NCI, Dr. Stolley and her colleagues developed a weight loss program called Moving Forward, which incorporates the practices, attitudes, and beliefs of urban African American breast cancer survivors in Chicago. The foundations of Moving Forward are culture, family lifestyles, community traditions, and social support.

A total of 240 African American breast cancer survivors will attend exercise and educational sessions twice a week. Researchers will evaluate whether the program helps the women lose weight and make dietary changes, and whether it changes markers of breast cancer progression.

Childhood Survivors

Dr. Stolley is also interested in African American survivors of childhood cancer as they grow older. In another NCI-supported study, she and her colleagues will compare African American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic white adult survivors of childhood cancers with others in those populations who did not have cancer. The researchers are looking at health behaviors such as diet, physical activity, and smoking, and at factors that may influence these behaviors (such as cultural beliefs and practices, spirituality, health knowledge, attitudes, social support, and others) to understand how race/ethnicity and having had cancer relate to health behaviors.

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For people who want to learn more about cancer survivorship, an NCI booklet can help: Facing Forward: Life After Cancer Treatment. A companion booklet for caregivers is also available: When Someone You Love Has Completed Cancer Treatment.

For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI web site at www.cancer.gov (or m.cancer.gov from your mobile device) or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)