

BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH STUDY



*Working together
to improve the
health of black
women*

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ACTIVITIES IN THE BWHS



2007 HEALTH SURVEY UPDATE

It's that time again. We mailed the paper version of the 2007 BWHS health survey in early May, and over

16,000 of you have filled it out already and mailed it back. In addition, the Web version of the 2007 BWHS health questionnaire is on the BWHS website (www.bu.edu/bwhs). More than 7,400 participants have chosen to fill out the questionnaire online rather than by mail. If you haven't filled out the survey on the Web and you haven't received one in the mail, please let us know—we may not have your correct address. If you'd like to complete your 2007 survey on the Web, please visit www.bu.edu/bwhs and click the "2007/08 Web Questionnaire" button on the left. As always, your participation is crucial to the success of the BWHS. Thank you!

GREAT NEWS FROM SUSAN G. KOMEN FOR THE CURE

Susan G. Komen for the Cure is a private foundation that raises money for breast cancer research. Perhaps you have taken part in one of their fundraising walks or races. The foundation has just awarded a grant to BWHS investigators for two important studies. Because U.S. census data show that black women tend to live in less advantaged neighborhoods than white women of the same level of education and income, we will study whether neighborhood characteristics affect the risk of breast cancer. The second study recognizes that many women in our society have been subjected to violence at various times in their lives. We will study whether having experienced violence increases the risk of breast cancer. This could occur perhaps through effects on the immune system.



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RACISM AND BREAST CANCER



Dr. Teletia Taylor reported in the April issue of the *American Journal of Epidemiology* that breast

cancer occurred more often among BWHS women who reported frequent experiences of racism than in BWHS women who experienced discrimination only rarely. What could explain these results? It may be that the stress associated with experiences of racism weakens the immune system. More work needs to be done to follow up this finding. A story on the study was published in England at www.voice-online.co.uk/content.php?show=11190.

NEIGHBORHOOD AND HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE



National Public Radio reported on **Dr. Yvette Cozier's** research. She found that BWHS participants

who lived in neighborhoods with low housing values developed high blood pressure more often than women who lived in wealthier neighborhoods. This finding, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, indicates that the circumstances in which people live can affect their risk of illness.

FAMILY HISTORY OF BREAST CANCER



Dr. Julie Palmer's results from the BWHS were presented at the annual meeting of the American

Association of Cancer Research and were featured in the meeting's press conference. She found that breast cancer risk is higher in women who have a mother or sister with breast cancer, and the increase is greater if the relative developed breast cancer at a young age. Women who have close relatives with breast cancer should not miss getting their yearly mammogram.

PCOS AND UTERINE FIBROIDS



Dr. Lauren Wise reported a possible link between PCOS (polycystic ovary syndrome) and increased occurrence of

uterine fibroids among BWHS participants. This is the first time that this link has been found and it will need to be confirmed in other studies. The finding was published in *Fertility and Sterility*.

As always, you can find information about research results from the BWHS on the BWHS website, www.bu.edu/bwhs.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO

More and more Americans are trying “alternative” approaches to improving health and preventing and curing illness. These approaches generally do not involve the traditional medical care system.

HERBAL SUPPLEMENTS

“Herbals,” which are substances derived from plants, have become big business, with millions of dollars spent on them every year. The Slone Survey, a national telephone survey of medication use, has found that the herbals most commonly taken by black women (each by about 5%) are lutein and lycopene. Both lutein and lycopene are “carotenoids,” which are “antioxidants”—substances that destroy certain chemicals in the body that are thought to contribute to aging and disease. Spinach and other leafy vegetables are good dietary sources of lutein, and tomatoes, grapefruit, and watermelon are good dietary sources of lycopene. The source of *supplemental* lutein and lycopene for most people is a multivitamin tablet. The next most commonly taken herbals, each by about 1% of black women, include garlic, black cohosh, and soy. There is as yet little scientific evidence supporting the usefulness of herbal supplements in preventing or curing illnesses. The few

studies that have looked at whether black cohosh and soy reduce menopausal symptoms (such as hot flashes and sweats) do not provide convincing evidence that these herbals are helpful. Garlic is taken by some people in hope of reducing cholesterol levels. Here again, the evidence does not establish the usefulness of this supplement. Regardless of whether garlic improves health, we think that it makes food taste delicious! If you are considering taking an herbal supplement, be sure to check if any side effects have been reported, including interactions with medications that you might be taking.



MENOPAUSE AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Menopause (“the change”) is also big business in the United States. Millions of women have been prescribed estrogen and progestin supplements to deal with their hot flashes and sweats. Now that female hormone supplements have been shown to cause breast cancer, blood clots, and other serious illnesses, their

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use has declined. The search is on for other ways to handle symptoms. Recently, researchers at Penn State University studied how walking and doing yoga affect “quality of life,” which includes not just menopausal symptoms but also a woman’s outlook on life, her mood, and her feelings of well-being. In a four-month study, women going through menopause were divided into three groups: one group walked three times a week, one group had yoga sessions twice a week, and the third group was not given any instruction or help with exercising. While there was some small reduction in symptoms in the walking and yoga groups, the biggest changes were in feelings of well-being.

Women in the walking group had the most positive changes, followed by women in the yoga group. The evidence continues to grow that exercise and practices like yoga have a variety of positive effects on physical and mental health.

DIET AND ASTHMA IN CHILDREN

Asthma affects millions of children, and in recent years there have been large increases in the number of kids affected. Allergies and infections can lead to inflammation of the airways, and inflamed airways in turn lead to asthma. Two studies, one from Greece and the other from Italy, suggest that fruits and vegetables may

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reduce asthma symptoms. In the study from Greece, children who ate grapes, oranges, apples, and tomatoes had less wheezing and inflammations due to allergies than children who rarely ate these foods. In the Italian study, fresh vegetables and fruit, especially salad and tomatoes, appeared to protect against wheezing. In both studies, eating margarine appeared to increase wheezing. Whether or not these results are confirmed, there are countless good reasons for our children (and ourselves) to be eating lots of fresh fruits and vegetables.

GLUCOSAMINE AND CHONDROITIN SULFATE

Cartilage is a connective tissue in our bodies that provides a framework for bone formation. Glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate are naturally present in our bodies and are thought to play a role in cartilage formation and repair. Many people have taken supplements of glucosamine (from shellfish) and chondroitin sulfate (from animal cartilage) alone or together for the relief of pain from knee osteoarthritis. While some studies have shown benefits from these supplements, others have not. In a recent large study, the response to placebo (a pill with no active ingredients) was about as good as the response to the supplements.

BLOOD COLLECTION IN THE BWHS

While many of us have had our cholesterol levels tested, much is still unknown about the specific effects of cholesterol levels and other blood "biomarkers" on risk of disease in black women. The BWHS could fill the knowledge gap if we can find a feasible way for BWHS participants all across the country to give blood samples. Recently we tested a method that might work nationwide. First, we obtained the cooperation of a national chain of blood laboratories. Then, we invited

1,500 BWHS participants in Chicago, New York, and Atlanta to go to a laboratory close to their home or work to provide a blood sample. Women who did so were reimbursed for their time and effort. As always, the samples were de-identified to protect confidentiality. The study was successful, and we have applied to the National Institutes of Health for funds so that all BWHS participants who wish to provide blood samples can do so.

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A heartfelt thank you to the 23,000 BWHS participants who have already completed the 2007 health survey.



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