

BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH STUDY



*Working together
to improve the
health of black
women*

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**A NOTE TO OUR FRIENDS
AFFECTED BY THE
HURRICANES AND FLOODS**

Our thoughts and sympathies have been with BWHS participants who were affected by the hurricanes and floods in the Gulf Coast region this past summer and fall. We very much hope that you and your families are safe and sound.

WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE BWHS?

We are now nine months into collection of health information with the 2005 health surveys. So far, we have received responses from 56% of BWHS participants. Please help to reach the goal of 100% participation.

If you're not sure if you returned your survey:

- Check online at www.bu.edu/bwhs (click on the "2005 Questionnaire" tab and enter your reference number—if you've returned your questionnaire, a message will pop up; if you haven't, you will be directed to the online questionnaire), or
- Call us at 1-800-786-0814, or
- E-mail us at bwhs@slone.bu.edu

You can complete your survey online or fill out the paper form and mail it in the postage-paid envelope provided. If you need a new paper form, please let us know.

The collection of **mouthwash saliva samples** (from which DNA is extracted and stored) continues. This project was described in the Fall 2005 newsletter. Thus far, 14,000 participants have provided mouthwash saliva samples. Each month, 1,000 participants are invited to send a sample. If you haven't yet heard from us, you will.

The **lupus study** is beginning. The U.S. National Institutes of Health is supporting a study of genes in relation to lupus. Evidence indicates that many genes may be involved. We hope to identify these genes so that better treatments can be developed and ways to prevent lupus can be found. Women who have reported lupus will receive a brochure explaining the study.



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FROM YOUR SURVEY RESPONSES TO STUDY RESULTS

Over the years, you answered many questions about health, illness, and lifestyle. For example, you told us whether you developed high blood pressure, lost weight, used female hormone supplements, exercised, had a mammogram, or felt happy, depressed, or stressed. This issue of the newsletter focuses on how your survey information is used to answer questions about the health of black women.

WHAT ISSUES ARE STUDIED?

The decision about what health issues are studied depends upon whether the disease or issue is important for black women, and whether the BWHS has collected enough information. For example, uterine fibroids affect large numbers of black women. They are three times more common in black women than white women. Fibroids cause pain and bleeding and can lead to hysterectomy. Over 4,000 BWHS participants have been newly diagnosed with fibroids since the BWHS began in 1995. With this large number, we are able to study many

factors to determine how women with fibroids differ from women without the condition. On the other hand, colon cancer is also a serious condition that occurs more often in black women than white women. However, it is relatively rare. Since 1995, 180 BWHS participants have been diagnosed with colon or rectal cancer. This number is too small for us to carry out detailed studies. But we are currently studying causes of colon and rectal polyps. Polyps can lead to colon cancer. They have been reported by over 1,500 BWHS participants.

Check out the March 2006 issue of Essence magazine for an article about the BWHS!

HERE IS HOW YOUR INFORMATION WAS USED TO STUDY...

FEMALE HORMONE SUPPLEMENTS AND BREAST CANCER

Many scientific studies have shown that female hormone supplements increase the risk of breast cancer. Most of the women in these studies were white. We used BWHS data to answer the question of how female hormone use affects breast cancer risk in black women. We studied information on female hormones and breast cancer status provided by 32,559 BWHS participants, aged 40 or older, in 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, and 2003. During this period of follow-up, 615 women reported breast cancer. Our analysis showed that the occurrence of breast cancer was increased by 17% among women who used female hormones for 5–9 years and 58% among women with 10 or more years of use, compared to women who had never used female hormones. The BWHS results strengthen the evidence that female hormones cause breast cancer. The results are being published in the journal *Archives of Internal Medicine*.

What does this mean for you?

If you decide to use female hormone supplements for relief of menopausal symptoms, it is best to use the lowest doses that work for you for the shortest possible time. Using them for many years could increase your risk of breast cancer.

HAIR RELAXERS AND PRETERM BIRTH

Black women give birth to premature babies about twice as often as white women. It is not known why. Many black women use hair relaxers. Relaxers are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration and may contain harmful substances. Could it be that some of these substances cause preterm births? This possibility was suggested by a study that found an increased risk of miscarriages in hairdressers. We used data that you provided in 1997 on your lifetime use of hair relaxers and information on births from the 1997, 1999, and 2001 surveys. We compared mothers of 497 preterm babies with mothers of 5,633 babies who were born full term. Use of hair relaxers was similar in the two groups of mothers—19% of the mothers of preterm babies had used hair relaxers at least 7 times a year for 15 or more years compared with 21% of the mothers of full-term babies. These results indicate that lifetime use of hair relaxers does not affect the occurrence of preterm birth. The results were published in the autumn issue of the journal *Ethnicity and Disease*.

What does this mean for you?

The evidence to date indicates that the use of hair relaxers does not increase the risk of preterm birth.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

In 1999, you answered 20 questions about your mood, feelings, and symptoms of depression. Those questions, called the CESD scale, are useful for measuring symptoms of depression. We looked at the relation of the CESD answers to exercise reported in 1997 and 1999. Based on the data of 35,224 BWHS participants, women who had not exercised in high school but who took up exercise as adults had fewer depressive symptoms than inactive women. Women who exercised as adults and who had also exercised in high school had the fewest depressive symptoms of all. Vigorous exercise seemed to be better than walking in reducing symptoms of depression. However, walking did seem to be effective in decreasing symptoms of depression in obese women. The results will be published in the journal *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*.

What does this mean for you?

Exercise protects against heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, some cancers, and obesity. Now there is evidence that depression should be added to the list. We should all try to find the time in our busy lives to exercise.

USE OF MAMMOGRAPHY SCREENING

Death rates from breast cancer are greater in black women than white women. Breast cancer in black women has tended to be detected at more advanced stages. Cancers that are detected at an earlier stage have higher cure rates. For this reason, women are advised to have mammography screening on a regular basis. On every survey, we have asked you whether you had a mammogram in the previous two years. To find out what factors are most important in influencing regular mammography use, we studied women who had answered the mammography questions on the 1997, 1999, and 2001 surveys. Based on 12,405 BWHS participants included in the analysis, having health insurance was the most important predictor of whether women had regular mammography screening. These results will be published in the journal *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers and Prevention*.

What does this mean for you?

Americans are increasingly losing their health insurance, as fewer businesses are willing to cover those costs. If you lose your health insurance, government-sponsored programs may be able to assist you in obtaining a mammogram at no cost.

WHAT ADDITIONAL ISSUES SHOULD BE STUDIED?

The BWHS continues to collect information on a variety of important illnesses, including breast cancer, diabetes, hypertension, fibroids, colon polyps, lupus, sarcoidosis, and glaucoma. We are studying factors that might affect these illnesses including exercise, diet, weight, smoking, contraceptive use, stress, experiences of racism, and characteristics of neighborhoods.

If you think that an area or topic needs attention, please let us know. We added questions on the 2005 survey about stress and coping because many of you felt that illnesses were being caused or affected by the stresses in your life.

A complete list and summary of research published from the BWHS is available on our website www.bu.edu/bwhs.

PLEASE COMPLETE THE 2005 HEALTH SURVEY

We hope that this newsletter has convinced you of the importance of the health information that you provide every two years. If you haven't yet completed the 2005 survey, please do so on our website or by filling out a paper questionnaire. Please call us with questions or to request another copy of the questionnaire. Thank you.





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