



BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH STUDY



*Working together
to improve the health of
black women*

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NEW FUNDING TO CONTINUE THE BWHS



The National Institutes of Health (NIH) funds most health and medical research in the United States and has supported the BWHS since its start 15 years ago. Studies are funded by NIH for up to five years at a time; when that period ends, investigators must apply for new funding by writing grant proposals with details about what has been achieved so far and what they plan to accomplish in the future. The grant proposals are then reviewed by committees of other scientific investigators—called Study Sections—which give each grant proposal a score. In recent years, only a small fraction of grant proposals, those with very good scores, have received funding. We are very pleased to tell you that our grant proposal to continue the BWHS received an outstanding score, sufficient to ensure that the BWHS will continue for at least another five years. The Study Section was highly impressed by the dedication of BWHS participants and the quality of the research that has come out of our study. Congratulations to us all!

A New Investigator Joins the BWHS

Dr. Edward Ruiz-Narvaez joined the BWHS team of investigators in January of this year. Dr. Ruiz-Narvaez grew up in Costa Rica and worked there as a population geneticist for several years; he came to the United States to obtain graduate-level training in epidemiology. He earned a doctoral degree in nutrition and genetics at the Harvard School of Public Health and followed that with two years of postdoctoral training in those fields. Dr. Ruiz-Narvaez has been working with Dr. Julie Palmer on the genetics of breast cancer and with Dr. Lynn Rosenberg on the genetics of lupus. With his valuable skills and expertise in genetics and nutrition, Dr. Ruiz-Narvaez is a wonderful addition to the BWHS research team.



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Since the start of 2008, the BWHS has published research reports on diabetes, asthma, preterm birth, breast cancer, weight change and other health issues. Please check out the BWHS website for details. Thank you for making this work possible!

On the following pages, we share some recent work.

Racism and weight gain. Racial discrimination is a form of chronic stress that has harmful effects on mental health and there is increasing recognition that it can also affect physical health. In both animal and human studies, stress-driven eaters have been found to prefer food rich in fats or to increase food intake. In view of that evidence, we studied whether experiences of racism are related to weight gain in the BWHS. On the 1997 health survey, participants reported how often they experienced racism in everyday life and on the job; in housing; and by police. Based on that information and weight reports every two years, we found that BWHS participants with more frequent experiences of racism gained more weight than women who reported few such experiences. These results suggest that experiences of racism may contribute to the excess burden of obesity in U.S. black women. (Cozier YC, Wise LA, Palmer JR, Rosenberg L. Perceived

Racism in Relation to Weight Change in the Black Women's Health Study. *Ann Epidemiol*, 2009; 19: 379-87.)

Violence and age at first menstrual period. In a few small studies, women abused sexually during childhood were found to have their first menstrual periods at an earlier age than women who were not abused. The 2005 BWHS health survey asked questions about physical and sexual violence at various times during life and we then assessed whether childhood abuse was related to the age at first menstrual period. Participants with experiences of sexual abuse tended to have an earlier first menstrual period than women who experienced no sexual abuse; physical abuse had little effect on the age at first menstruation. Estrogen production begins when menstruation begins. If sexual abuse does affect the age at first period, it is possible that it also affects the occurrence of estrogen-related illnesses. We will study that possibility in the BWHS. (Wise LA, Palmer JR, Rothman EF, Rosenberg L. Childhood Abuse and Early Menarche: Findings from the Black Women's Health Study. *Am J Public Health*, May 14, 2009, E-Pub.)

Old and new questions. As you know, through health surveys every two years the BWHS collects information on factors that could influence health and illness. Some of the questions we ask are the same every time because we need to know if these factors have changed—for example, whether you are using estrogen supplements, whether you are exercising, how much you weigh, and whether you have had a mammogram. From time to time we may also ask about experiences of racism or violence, your eating habits, or your family history of various illnesses. The 2009 health survey contains the usual questions—and some new ones, which we explain in the following paragraphs. If you want further information, just call or e-mail us.

Hair products. You may remember that we asked you about use of hair relaxers on a previous questionnaire (and found that relaxers do not affect the occurrence of preterm birth or breast cancer). Now we are extending our research on hair products to root stimulators and leave-in conditioners, which are used by millions of black women, sometimes for many years starting in childhood. Some BWHS participants have asked us if these products are safe. No one can answer that question because there is almost no information in the scientific literature about their possible health effects. We will classify the root stimu-



lators and leave-in conditioners that you report according to what they contain and then assess their relation to various health outcomes.

Breastfeeding. Some scientists have suggested that having been breastfed could affect a person's health many years later in adulthood. On the 2009 survey, we ask whether you were breastfed. We will use that information to study possible effects on various health outcomes.

Sleep. We know that sleep affects the way that we feel, but some scientists are now proposing that the amount of sleep we get affects the development of various diseases. To be able to assess whether there is any truth to this, on the 2009 health survey we ask about how much you usually sleep.

Lefthandedness. Some scientists have proposed that the hormone levels in a mother's womb during pregnancy affect whether the baby is left- or right-handed. According to this theory, if hormone levels are higher, the baby is more likely to be left-handed. However, if the baby has many left-handed relatives, then the baby's left-handedness is probably due to genes, not hormones in the womb. If the theory is correct and left-handedness that is not due to genes does reflect hormone exposure in the womb, then left-handedness might be associated with the risk of some hormone-related conditions later in life. The BWHS can contribute evidence one way or the other on this theory—either putting it to rest or showing that there is something to it. Thus, the 2009 health survey asks about which hand you use most often, and about whether your parents are left-handed.

Experiences of racism. We have found that BWHS participants who experienced racism frequently gained more weight than those who reported infrequent experiences (described earlier in this newsletter), and in an earlier study we found racism to be related to an increased occurrence of fibroids in the womb. Health researchers are finding links between racism and other health outcomes as well. Because the BWHS should be documenting any adverse

health effects of racism, we asked about experiences of racism in 1997. The 2009 questionnaire is an update to find out whether your experiences of racism have changed since 1997.

Time spent outdoors. It's been known for years that Vitamin D builds bones. Now there are theories that it may be involved with many other health outcomes. The major source of Vitamin D is exposure to sunlight, so we have added questions about the amount of time you usually spend outdoors.



OTHER BWHS NEWS

The Increasing Popularity of Completing the BWHS Health Survey on the Web

From 1995 through the 1999, the BWHS used paper surveys only; you filled out the survey using pen or pencil and mailed it to the BWHS central office. In 2001, for the first time there was another option—completing the survey online. By the end of the 2001 cycle of health data collection, 2,127 participants had filled out the survey online. The number of Web respondents increased to 4,715 for the 2003 survey, 7,185 for the 2005 survey, and 8,944 for the 2007 survey. The 2009 health survey has already been completed by more than 10,600 participants and the number is increasing quickly. Web respondents include

8 participants in their 80s and 218 in their 70s, indicating that these BWHS seniors have kept up with modern technology! We have e-mailed everyone for whom we have an e-mail address about the online option for the 2009 survey. If you haven't received an e-mail notice from us, it means we don't have your address. If you'd like us to e-mail you, please send your address to us at BWHS@bu.edu. Many thanks to the BWHS participants who have completed the 2009 survey online or on paper!



Current Research Projects in the BWHS

This May, the BWHS presented preliminary results at the meetings of the American Association for Cancer Research on whether fruit and vegetable intake is associated with the occurrence of breast cancer. This June, BWHS presented findings at the Society for Epidemiologic Research on whether weight, smoking, and alcohol use influence the occurrence of glaucoma, which is a leading cause of blindness around the world and in the U.S.; whether dairy and soy products or the amount and type of starches in the diet influence the occurrence of fibroids in the uterus (womb); whether reproductive factors affect the incidence of sarcoidosis; and whether coffee and alcohol consumption affect the occurrence of diabetes.

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Many thanks to the more than 10,000 BWHS participants who have already completed the 2009 health survey. Not sure if you've sent it in? If the 8-digit number printed below the address update section on the back of this newsletter begins with R, we have received your survey.



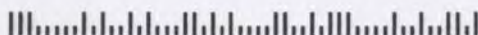
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