



BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH STUDY



**Working together
to improve the health of
black women**

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bu.edu/bwhs

NEWS FROM THE BWHS

THE 20-YEAR ANNIVERSARY of the BWHS has passed. We hope that you received the **BWHS 20 Year Report** – it summarizes two decades of research findings. If you did not receive the Report, let us know so that we can send you a copy. The BWHS continues with the 2015 health survey, which has a number of questions on sleep and sleep disturbances. This is because of growing evidence that some types of sleep patterns may be related to increased risk of physical illnesses such as diabetes. The evidence from studies of Black women is not sufficient to draw conclusions, so it will be up to the BWHS to provide answers. On another topic, you may know that hair loss is a problem that affects many Black women. Again, there are unanswered questions about causes. The BWHS website contains a questionnaire specifically about hair loss and more than 5,000 participants who answered the 2015 health survey also answered the separate hair-loss survey. If you are interested in the hair loss survey, please go to the BWHS website (bu.edu/BWHS) and click on the link on the home page.

Much medical and scientific research these days is going in the direction of BIG. Just as soon as one question is answered, new questions arise that require larger numbers. The BWHS is the largest health study following Black women, yet we still need to band together with other studies to answer these new questions. We have reported in past newsletters about some of these collaborations. To name a few, BWHS is collaborating with other studies to assess causes of aggressive types of breast cancer (such as “triple negative”) that affect Black women more than other women, to study the genetics of uterine fibroids, and to assess risk factors for pancreatic cancer. As always, the data shared are “anonymous” – group analyses are carried out and it is not possible to link data to any particular individual. It will take some time for results to emerge, but we will report on them when we have them.

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BWHS COLLABORATION WITH THE BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH IMPERATIVE

The BWHS has been working with the Black Women's Health Imperative, a national organization that aims "to advance health equity and social justice for Black women... through policy and advocacy, education, research and leadership development." It is the only national organization in the U.S. that focuses on health and wellness in Black women and girls. The Imperative collaborates with community leaders, community groups, professional organizations, political groups, researchers, and others to meet the vision of "all Black women [enjoying] optimal health in a society that promotes health equity and social justice."

As you know, the year 2016 is a big election year. Voters will choose the new U.S. president and vote for elected officials at multiple levels. The Imperative is working to make the health of Black women a part of the national discussion leading up to the 2016 elections. The Imperative hopes to use results from the BWHS along with other sources of data to encourage politicians and the public to recognize the importance of Black women's health and to support policies for social change that will benefit Black women.

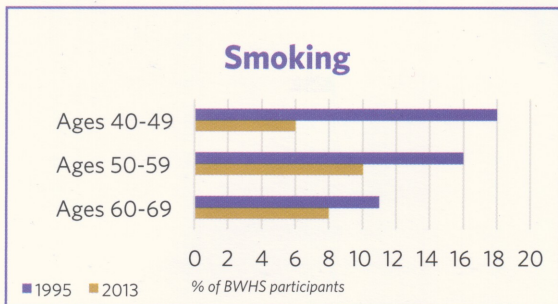


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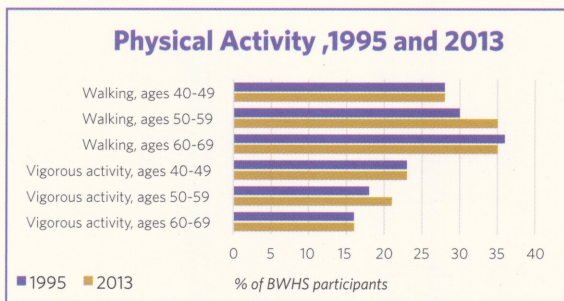
As part of this effort, BWHS is accessing how BWHS participants *perceive the state of their health* and which factors influence that perception. Some women have serious illnesses, yet they rate their overall health and quality of life as good, while other women free of disease rate their overall health and quality of life as poor. Perceptions of health influence how women live their lives. Which factors are most important in influencing women's determination of their health status? Physical health? Social support? Mental health? Exercise? Living conditions? Because of the wealth of health data that BWHS participants have provided, BWHS investigators are in a unique position to conduct research that can then be used to promote improvements in Black women's health and action on health equity in political and business communities.

Are you living a healthier life now compared to women who were your current age in 1995?

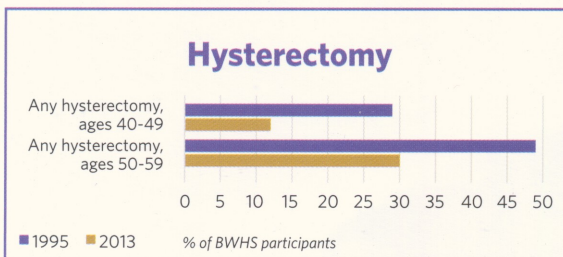
Smoking. Smoking among BWHS participants has declined. The biggest decrease was for the 40-49 age group: 18% of participants 40-49 in 1995 reported smoking compared with 7% in 2013.



Physical activity. As the chart on physical activity shows, as women get older, walking for exercise becomes more popular and vigorous exercise becomes less popular. Vigorous exercise is great for health, but so too is walking. BWHS participants ages 50-59 are walking and exercising a bit more in 2013 than 50-59 year old participants were in 1995.



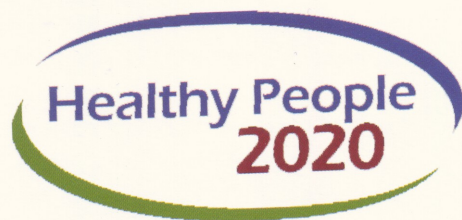
Hysterectomy. In 1995, 30% of BWHS participants ages 40-49 and 48% of those 50-59 reported hysterectomies, compared with 12% of women 40-49 and 30% of women 50-59 in 2013. This is a desirable change given the history of overuse of these procedures in the U.S.



HEALTH GOALS OF HEALTHY PEOPLE 2020

Healthy People 2020 is an initiative of the federal government “to achieve health equity, eliminate health disparities, and improve the health of all groups.” The effort began in 1990 to provide a framework for national, state, local, and individual efforts. Visit www.healthypeople.gov to learn more.

One of the goals of Healthy People 2020 is a reduction in obesity. This goal is proving hard to meet, with obesity increasing instead of decreasing in the U.S. as a whole as well as in the BWHS. However, there have been some encouraging reports that the obesity epidemic among youngsters may be slowing or reversing, with some of the credit given to lower intake of sugared drinks.



Societal changes have contributed to increased obesity in the U.S. and worldwide. There have been unhealthy changes in the food supply (such as more processed foods, less access to fruits and vegetables in poorer neighborhoods) and in physical activity (such as more time sitting at computers, less physical activity in schools). While these societal issues need to be addressed, individuals can also take actions in their own lives. Healthy People 2020 suggests strategies supported by BWHS research – eating more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, eating less meat, fried foods, and sweets, and being physically active.

Physical activity is key not just for managing weight but also for general physical health. As shown in the BWHS and other studies, regular physical activity can lower the risk of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, stroke, some cancers, and depression. The Healthy People 2020 goal is for every adult to do some leisure-time physical activity.

The Healthy People 2020 goal of decreasing cigarette smoking among adults to 12% or less has already been met in the BWHS (see graph on previous page).

BWHS participants also meet the Healthy People 2020 goal for alcohol use, with a very low percentage of women reporting drinking 7 or more alcoholic drinks per week.

PRESENTATION OF BREAST CANCER FINDINGS

Triple negative breast cancer is an aggressive breast cancer subtype that accounts for almost a third of breast cancers in African American women compared to about one-fifth of breast cancers in White women. BWHS investigators have been studying potential causes using BWHS data together with data from other studies. This research provides evidence to suggest that breast feeding may be protective against triple negative cancer—that is, women who have breastfed have a lower risk than women who have not breastfed, all other factors being equal. It is great news that a practice that is good for the health of the baby may also contribute to better health for the mother. Dr. Lynn Rosenberg presented these findings at the 20th Annual HeLa Conference at Morehouse School of Medicine in September. The HeLa conference honors Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman whose cancer cells became “immortal”. They were the very first to be kept alive in a laboratory and they have been used in many studies that have tested and identified treatments against cancer.

NEW RESEARCH STARTING IN BWHS ON LUPUS

Lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus, or SLE) is an autoimmune disease that affects women much more commonly than men and Black women more commonly than women of other ethnic groups. The illness can affect many parts of the body, and common symptoms are skin rash and joint pain. Causes are poorly understood. The disease occurs relatively rarely. In order to increase the number of women with lupus who can be studied, the BWHS is teaming up with Harvard University colleagues. They have been conducting a follow-up study of a large population of White nurses using methods very similar to those of BWHS. The BWHS and Harvard investigators will conduct analyses in parallel: they will assess the association of potential risk factors with lupus in each study separately and then compare the results. The factors to be studied include dietary patterns, body size, and stressors.

UPDATE ON BLOOD COLLECTION

Over 7,000 BWHS participants have already chosen to provide a blood sample to be used in BWHS research. Blood sample collection has wrapped up in the southern states as well as Texas and New Mexico. It is currently active in the west, midwest and northwest. In future months, invitations to participate will be mailed to BWHS participants in the northeast and mid-atlantic states.

THE 2015 HEALTH INFORMATION UPDATE

It's about that time again - time to update your health information with the BWHS.

A big THANK YOU to all of the 28,000 participants who have already completed an online or paper 2015 survey and a big THANK YOU in advance to all the participants who have not yet completed a survey but plan to do so. The health information you provide has contributed to improved health for Black women and will continue to benefit the health of current and future generations.

*BWHS
needs
your help!*

You can complete the questionnaire online at <https://slone-web.bu.edu/BWHS/2015>, by phone, or on paper. (Just let us know if you need a paper version of the questionnaire.) If you need assistance completing the questionnaire **please call us at 1-800-786-0814**.



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