

# 7 DISEASES THAT AFFECT YOUR HEALTH, AND WHAT YOU CAN DO

Your health is determined by a lot of factors, things like biology, genetics, culture, behavior, and access to care. Often, different groups of people have different health considerations and risks.

As an African-American woman, it's important to know yours—and what you can do about them.

Black women have higher rates of undetected diseases, illness, and chronic conditions, as well as shorter life expectancy, than other groups.

According to Dr. Janine Austin Clayton, Associate Director of Research on Women's Health at the National Institutes of Health, there's a lot you can do for your health, starting by talking with your doctor.

*"It is important for a woman to be the best advocate that she can be for her health. Women are so often the caretakers of their family, putting the health of others before their own. But wives, mothers, and daughters need to make sure that their health needs are met in order to be there for others."*

*—Dr. Janine Austin Clayton*

## HERE'S WHERE TO START:

### 1. Heart disease and stroke.

Though rates have been improving, heart disease is still the #1 killer of black women, and stroke is the #3 killer. High blood pressure, overweight and obesity, and diabetes are the most common conditions that can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke. African-American women develop high blood pressure earlier in life and have higher average blood pressures compared with other women.

**Take action:** Women can lower their heart disease risk by as much as 82 percent just by leading a healthy lifestyle. To lower your chances of developing these diseases, maintain a healthy weight and diet, stop smoking, increase physical activity, and reduce stress.

### 2. Cancer.

Cancer is the second leading cause of death for black women, who are more likely than other women to die from breast and cervical cancers. This is usually because abnormal cells or tumors are found at a later, more advanced stage.

**Take Action:** Regular screening is the best way to find breast and cervical cancers early in most women. Talk to your doctor about what screening tests are right for you.

### 3. Type 2 diabetes.

One in four African-American women older than 55 has type 2 diabetes. You or a loved one could have type 2 diabetes and not know it; sometimes it has no warning signs.

**Take action:** Talk to your doctor about diabetes in your family and how often you should check your blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and blood sugar levels. Maintain a healthy weight by eating well-balanced meals and making physical activity a regular part of your life.

- 4. Maternal health.** When it comes to having a baby, your health matters before, during, and after pregnancy. Black women are 3 to 4 times more likely than other groups to die of pregnancy-related complications, particularly ectopic pregnancies and preeclampsia. Some health problems, like high blood pressure, could affect your pregnancy.

**Take action:** Be sure to talk with your doctor early to understand steps you can take at different stages to help ensure the best health for you and your unborn baby. Keep all regularly scheduled prenatal visits with your doctor so problems that arise can be found as early as possible and treated. All women can get prenatal care. Every state in the United States has a program to help pregnant women in need get free or low-cost prenatal care. Call 800-311-BABY to find out about the program in your state.

- 5. HIV.** African-American women accounted for 64 percent of new HIV infections reported among women in 2010, and also had the highest death rates from HIV disease among all groups of women. It is the third-ranked cause of death among black women ages 35–44. Most of these women got HIV from having unprotected sex with men.

**Take action:** You can have HIV and still feel healthy. The only way to know for sure whether you are infected is to get tested. Prevent getting or spreading HIV by using latex condoms every time you have any kind of sex. All newly pregnant women should be tested for HIV as early in pregnancy as possible, even if you're considered low risk. With early prenatal care and treatment, many babies of HIV-positive mothers do not get HIV.

- 6. Overweight and obesity.** More than 80 percent of midlife African-American women are overweight or obese, which increases risk for heart disease, heart attack, diabetes, and high cholesterol and blood pressure.

**Take action:** Lead an active lifestyle! More than half of black women reported that they have sedentary lifestyles. Increase physical activity and look for opportunities to move more, like parking

further away from entrances, dancing at home, and taking the stairs at work. Encourage friends and family to join you.

- 7. Stress.** African-American women are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of race-related stress. Stress can cause arteries to narrow, make it harder to lose weight—especially dangerous belly fat—and raise blood pressure and risk for heart attack.

**Take action:** Consider ways to reduce stress: breathing techniques, exercise, yoga, journaling, talking and laughing with friends, getting outdoors, saying no to non-priority activities, and finding more time for your favorite ways to unwind.



**You are the best advocate for your health. Create awareness for yourself and family, ask questions, and talk to your doctor regularly.**



**National Institutes of Health**  
Office of Research on Women's Health