

BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH STUDY

FALL 2005 NEWSLETTER



Working together to improve
the health of black women

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SPOTLIGHT ON LUPUS: A NEW STUDY

We have great news. The U.S. National Institutes of Health will support a study of lupus within the BWHS. Lupus affects black women much more commonly than men or other women. There is a genetic contribution to developing lupus, but no single gene is responsible. Rather, it seems that many genes may make a contribution to a person's chance of developing the illness. The BWHS lupus study seeks to identify those genes. The hope is that this will lead to a better understanding of how lupus develops, opening the way for better treatments and preventives. BWHS participants who report having lupus will be asked to allow review of their medical records and to provide a mouthwash saliva sample if they have not already done so (see the description of the mouthwash study later in this newsletter). The DNA in the samples will be compared with DNA of women who do not develop lupus.

A voice from the BWHS: "I can't believe it has been 10 years since I signed up for this monumental study. I can truthfully say, 10 years older, I take very seriously how our health is impacted by various factors in our lives...I have become more aware of what I eat and so far I am slowly changing certain behaviors."

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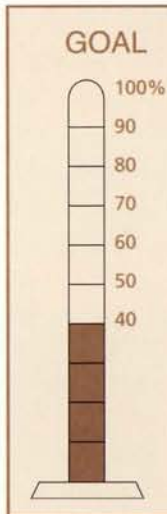
HEALTH AND ILLNESS IN THE BWHS

When the BWHS began 10 years ago in 1995, the 59,000 participants ranged from 21 to 69 years of age, with an average age of 38. Now the youngest participant is 31 and the oldest is 79. Many participants remain healthy. Some have been diagnosed with various illnesses including over 4,000 women with high blood pressure, 3,000 with fibroids, 2,000 with diabetes, 800 with breast cancer, and 350 with lupus. Sadly, there have been 1,642 deaths.

The 2005 health survey

Over 24,000 BWHS participants (about 40%) have already completed the 2005 health survey; 5,400 completed it online at our website (www.bu.edu/bwhs) and the remainder filled in the bubbles on the paper survey and mailed it to us. Over the years, many participants have suggested that the BWHS should look at the health effects of stress. In response to that suggestion and because stress may be involved with a wide range of illnesses, the 2005 survey includes questions about stress from various sources, and about coping with stress. If you have not completed your 2005 survey, please do so and help get the BWHS as close to 100% participation as possible.

A voice from the BWHS: "Some of the questions reminded me of events that have shaped my life over the years. They may hold the key to why I am the way I am now."



Recent findings from the BWHS

- The risk of developing hypertension increases sharply as weight increases.
- The risk of diabetes is much greater among overweight and obese women, and increases with weight gain.
- Breast cancer risk may be increased in the small group of women who began smoking in their early teenage years and smoked heavily for over 20 years.
- Women who engage in vigorous exercise have fewer symptoms of depression than inactive women.
- The strongest predictor of having a mammogram is having health insurance.

PROFILES: HOWARD UNIVERSITY INVESTIGATORS

The BWHS is a collaboration between investigators at Boston University and Howard University. While Boston University staff handle the data collection, the research effort involves the expertise of many talented investigators from both institutions, including these four from Howard.

Marie-Claude Jiguep, PhD

Marie-Claude Jiguep holds a PhD in Sociology with specializations in social inequality, urban sociology, and research methodology/statistics. She currently serves as a Social Scientist at the Howard University Cancer Center and Assistant Professor of Medicine in the Department of Community Health and Family Medicine. Her research interests are in the prevention of cervical cancer, the study of cancer screening behaviors, and the reduction of cancer health disparities. She has conducted research on the determinants of sexually preventable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and exposure to violence in African-American and other underserved women. Within the BWHS, she has been collaborating on a study examining perceptions of racial discrimination in relation to neighborhood racial composition.



Kepher H. Makambi, PhD

Kepher Makambi, a biostatistician, is an Assistant Professor of Medicine at Howard University Cancer Center. Dr. Makambi received a PhD in Statistics from the University of Dortmund in Germany. He teaches biostatistics to students in the Master of Public Health program at Howard University. One of his research interests is the application of multivariate statistical techniques to the study of cancer. He is particularly interested in models that predict breast cancer risk among populations of African-American women.



A voice from the BWHS: "When I think of the numbers of minority women who have been underserved in all areas of life, I pray that the information from this survey will make a difference to at least one woman in the future."

Teletia R. Taylor, PhD

Teletia Taylor received her doctorate in Biological Psychology from Howard University, with a concentration on stress and cardiovascular health among ethnic populations. While at Howard University, Dr. Taylor received a Minority International Research Training Fellowship, and conducted a project on urban and rural cardiovascular health in Zimbabwe, Africa. Dr. Taylor completed a fellowship at the University of Pittsburgh, where she assisted with the Pittsburgh Healthy Heart Project. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Medicine at Howard University, where she co-directs the Biobehavioral and Exercise Physiology Laboratory. This laboratory studies the effects of stress reduction through exercise and psychological stress management techniques on quality of life in cancer patients and those at high risk for cancer. Within the BWHS, Dr. Taylor has been assessing whether experiences of racial discrimination are associated with the occurrence of breast cancer.



Carla Williams, PhD

Carla Williams is an Assistant Professor of Medicine at Howard University. She is a clinical psychologist who specializes in understanding and facilitating health-related behavior change. She received her PhD from the Howard University Department of Psychology in 2002. Her current research focuses on addictive disorders. She directs studies examining the interactions between genetics, personality traits, and nicotine and alcohol use among African-Americans. She also studies behaviors that may help people avoid starting or be successful in stopping smoking. In addition, Dr. Williams coordinates community outreach activities to educate the public about the dangers of tobacco use and runs smoking cessation classes for the community. Within the BWHS, Dr. Williams has been assessing factors associated with depressive symptoms among participants.



A voice from the BWHS: "Being involved with this survey and receiving all the literature and e-mails makes me feel I'm making a difference in the lives of all women—including myself—and that's a great feeling!"

UPDATE ON THE MOUTHWASH STUDY

It's been more than a year since we began requesting mouthwash saliva samples from BWHS participants. The study involves sending participants a collection kit that contains mouthwash—women swish the mouthwash and then spit the sample into a container and mail it to Dr. Charles Rotimi's laboratory at the Howard University Cancer Center (see photo below). To date, 12,000 of you have mailed back samples. We are sending the mouthwash collection kits in batches over a four-year period, so you may not have received a request yet. Eventually, everyone will be invited to participate. For those of you who have given a saliva sample, thank you! For those who will be receiving a collection kit in the future, we hope you will decide to participate.

Amazingly, the saliva samples that you provide contain enough genetic material to enable the examination of variations in genes that may help explain the biology of certain diseases. We expect that the genetic analyses will lead to information that clarifies just how specific diseases develop in the human body. For example, by understanding the steps that lead to the development of diabetes or a particular cancer, we will have a better idea of how to prevent or fight those illnesses.

Because we will be comparing genetic variation between women who have a certain disease and those who do not have the disease, it is important that healthy women, as well as women who have an illness, provide saliva samples. Right now, the conditions that are on the top of our list for using the BWHS saliva samples are breast cancer, diabetes, and lupus. Others will be added as funding becomes available to study additional illnesses. Our hope and expectation is that understanding the mechanisms of how diseases develop will help identify more effective preventives and treatments.



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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: How many women are still participating in the BWHS?

Answer: Over 80% of the original 59,000 participants completed the 2003 survey. We cannot locate about 5% of the original participants because we were unable to obtain their correct addresses after they moved, and 2.8% of the original participants have passed away.

Question: How much longer will the study continue?

Answer: The study, in progress for 10 years, has received funding from the U.S. National Institutes of Health for an additional five years. The study will continue as long as the funding agencies think it is valuable and as long as the participants share that opinion.

Question: Do you plan to study how diet and lack of exercise lead to type 2 diabetes?

Answer: Yes. We have just begun an effort to study exactly those issues. This effort is important because diabetes affects many African-American women.

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