

# Black Women's Health Study



BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE



HOWARD UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

## January 2000 Newsletter

# News from the BWHS Exercise and Your Heart

## WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF BLACK WOMEN

## EXERCISE AND YOUR HEART

Lack of physical activity is linked to an increased occurrence of many serious health problems. It seemed timely to devote this issue of the newsletter to physical activity and coronary heart disease. A report describing physical activity in the BWHS has just been accepted for publication; an article on risk factors for coronary heart disease in the BWHS has just been published; and an article about the influence of walking and vigorous physical activity on the occurrence of heart disease in the Nurses' Health Study has just clarified what levels of activity may be protective against heart disease.

### Confidentiality

*As soon as the questionnaires are received at our office, the sheet with personal information is detached from the rest of the questionnaire and stored separately. Published information provides group statistics only and never individual information. Furthermore, by law, the Black Women's Health Study is prohibited from providing participant information to outside sources.*

## 1999 BWHS HEALTH QUESTIONNAIRE

Every two years we update information on the health of BWHS participants through health questionnaires. The 1999 questionnaire has been completed and returned by 42,000 BWHS participants so far. If you haven't received your 1999 questionnaire, please call us toll free at 1-800-786-0814 to let us know and we will send you one. If you haven't filled yours out, please do. We need you!! The validity of the study depends on information from all 64,500 participants.



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## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE BWHS



An assessment of levels of physical activity among BWHS participants, “Descriptive Epidemiology of Physical Activity in African American Women,” will soon be published in the journal *Preventive Medicine*. The report uses information from the 1995 BWHS health questionnaire.

Levels of walking for exercise and vigorous physical activity were low among BWHS participants. 57% walked for exercise infrequently or not at all, and 61% exercised vigorously infrequently or not at all. Most participants reported more than an hour a week of “moderate” physical activity, which included childcare and housework. While time-consuming and taxing, childcare and housework have not been shown to be protective against heart disease.

Levels of walking and vigorous exercise were greater among women who lived in the West, did not smoke, and were not overweight. Older women walked for exercise more than younger women, but they were much less likely to exercise vigorously. Women who reported having had heart disease or cancer exercised less than women who did not have these conditions. The strongest “predictor” of exercise in adulthood was having participated in strenuous physical activity in high school. This suggests that exercise patterns may be set in childhood. We should encourage our children to exercise!

Some women may not have the time or a safe or appropriate place to walk or exercise vigorously. Whatever the reasons, the BWHS data indicate that BWHS participants, like other U.S. women, tend not to exercise at levels that are optimal for good health and protection against heart disease.

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## CORONARY HEART DISEASE IN THE BWHS

Coronary heart disease is one of the major causes of illness and death among American women of all races. The lead article in the November 1, 1999 issue of the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, "Risk Factors for Coronary Heart Disease in African-American Women," is based on 1995 BWHS data. Women who had had heart attacks or other forms of coronary heart disease were compared with women who had not had these illnesses. An increased occurrence of heart disease was linked to cigarette smoking, diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and elevated cholesterol levels. All of these factors can be modified to reduce the risk. For example, hypertension and diabetes occur more commonly in obese women, and the occurrence of these conditions can be reduced by weight loss. The 1999 BWHS health questionnaire includes several questions about success or lack of success in weight loss. Based on data from the first 20,000 BWHS participants who sent in their completed 1999 questionnaires, the factor cited most often in successful efforts to keep weight off is exercise, often coupled with a balanced low-calorie diet or smaller portion sizes.

## EXERCISE TO PREVENT CORONARY HEART DISEASE

The evidence keeps growing that physical activity decreases the occurrence of coronary heart disease, but the evidence has been based mostly on studies of men. There is not yet sufficient information on this relationship in the BWHS for a detailed assessment. However, this summer a report on exercise and heart disease in white women appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, based on information collected through questionnaires from the participants in the Nurses' Health Study. The study, very similar in methods to the BWHS, has been in progress for 25 years. The women who exercised the most had the lowest rates of heart disease. Vigorous exercise was protective, but so too was brisk walking. Regular vigorous exercise or brisk walking for a few hours a week reduced the occurrence of coronary heart disease by about 25%. The protective effect of exercise was apparent even among women who had a family history of heart disease or were at high risk because of smoking or other reasons. Women who had been inactive in the past but who then became active also lowered their risk. Thus, it seems that it is never too late to start being active.



# NEWS FROM THE BWHS

## Funding

The National Institutes of Health has awarded funds to the BWHS for a continuation of the study for the next five years! (Studies are funded, at most, for five years at a time and then are re-evaluated.) This is a vote of confidence by the National Institutes of Health in the ability of the BWHS to provide important insights into health and illness in black women. It is also a vote of confidence in the BWHS participants who have made the study possible.

## Investigators

Dr. Lucile Adams-Campbell has been elected to the governing board of the American Public Health Association. The Association, with tens of thousands of members, is the largest professional organiza-

tion of public health professionals in the country. This organization is a voice for health research, prevention programs, and the improvement of the nation's health.

## Publications

Dr. Julie Palmer's report on factors related to the occurrence of hysterectomy among BWHS participants, "Correlates of Hysterectomy in African-American Women," will soon appear in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*. Many women have a long recovery period after hysterectomy (removal of the womb), and it is important that the surgery be done only when medically necessary. Hysterectomies in the BWHS were related both to a woman's level of education and to the region of the country in which she lived. These results suggest

that nonmedical factors may be involved in the decision and reinforces the advice often given to people considering surgery—obtain a second opinion if you have any doubts.

## Substudies within the BWHS

In the next few months, Dr. Adams-Campbell will be inviting BWHS participants chosen at random to participate in a validation study of physical activity. Women will be asked about their physical activity four times during the year, and asked to keep diaries for short periods. The idea is to determine how well questions on the BWHS health questionnaires capture what women actually do in terms of exercise and physical activity.