



# BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH STUDY



*Working together  
to improve the health of  
Black women*

- 25th Anniversary Webinars in brief:
  - 25 Years and Still Going Strong
  - COVID in the BWHS and Beyond
  - BWHS in 2021 and Future Research Plans

- Research Update: Vitamin D and COVID-19 Infection

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## WEBINARS IN BRIEF, CONTINUED

### 25 YEARS AND STILL GOING STRONG, CONTINUED

**What do you consider the greatest success of the BWHS?** There is no single answer. The research has filled many critical gaps in knowledge, including the health effects of racism and stress. All BWHS publications are described at the BWHS website ([www.bu.edu/bwhs/publications](http://www.bu.edu/bwhs/publications)).

**What are the results of the sleep study?** We conducted a randomized clinical trial to compare a standard treatment with two variations of an online treatment program for insomnia. We will share the results once they are final.

**Please talk about hair loss and alopecia.** Black women experience central scalp hair loss more than other women. BWHS worked with a dermatologist to develop a questionnaire about hair loss. Analyses found that diabetes is strongly related to this type of hair loss.

**Does the breast cancer gene operate among Black women?** Yes. BWHS contributed to a study showing that high-risk breast cancer genes increase breast cancer risk in Black women just as in White women. Doctors need to know that Black women who might have these genes



(that is, with a strong family history of breast cancer) should be referred for genetic testing.

**I am very apprehensive about sharing biological samples. How do you secure my information?**

Biologic samples are assigned a unique number different from the participant's study ID. Samples are stored securely without information that could identify a specific person. Research uses the data without personal identifiers. There has never been a breach of security in the BWHS.

*The webinar concluded with a performance by Boston University's Inner Strength Gospel Choir ([bu.edu/bwhs/25thAnniversary](http://bu.edu/bwhs/25thAnniversary)).*



## COVID IN THE BWHS AND BEYOND

November 5, 2020 webinar: BWHS Senior Investigator Dr. Yvette C. Cozier; BWHS collaborator Dr. Michelle A. Albert; BWHS Advisory Board members Dr. Ellen Grant and Dr. Linda Clayton.

The BWHS is currently studying risk factors for COVID-19 infection and cardiovascular complications following infection.

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Do adequate levels of vitamin D decrease severity of COVID-19 infections?** BWHS has just published data indicating that higher levels of serum vitamin D are associated with lower COVID-19 infection rates (see page 7 for the latest on this question).

**Is there any credibility to reports that COVID-19 affects certain blood types more than others?** No.

**One of the major disruptions with COVID-19 was preventative care—going in for annual checkups, mammograms, colonoscopies, etc. What is the advice regarding putting off preventative visits?** Try not to miss any of your preventative appointments. At the time of writing this newsletter, in-person visits are now routine. If virtual visits are available and appropriate for the care you need, you may prefer that alternative.

**Has there been an uptick in Black women being treated for depression and mental illness during the pandemic?** There has been more depression and anxiety as well as increased alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse in the

general population. Sources of help and information are: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration National Helpline (1-800-662-HELP / 1-800-622-4357 or <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>), National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE / 1-800-799-7233 or <https://www.thehotline.org/>), and/or Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-4-A-CHILD / 1-800-422-4453 or <https://www.childhelp.org/>).

**Are there strategies around dealing with family or friends who are not as cautious or mindful of the risk for COVID-19?** You can help friends and family to understand how COVID-19 spreads through close contact with infected people. To protect yourself and those living with you, set rules for social distancing and who can enter your home, following CDC guidance. ([www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping)).

*The webinar concluded with Lucille Clifton's poem "won't you celebrate with me", read by Crystal Williams, BU Vice President and Associate Provost for Community and Inclusion ([bu.edu/bwhs/25thAnniversary](http://bu.edu/bwhs/25thAnniversary))*

## WEBINARS IN BRIEF, CONTINUED

### BWHS IN 2021 AND FUTURE RESEARCH PLANS

April 13, 2021 webinar: BWHS Principal Investigators Lynn Rosenberg and Julie Palmer; BWHS Senior Investigator Yvette C. Cozier, doctoral candidate and BWHS trainee Lauren Barber; BWHS participant and cancer survivor Velyna Johnson, who recommended the book *Breast Cancer Husband* by Marc Silver.

Future BWHS research will address identifying factors that improve quality of life and survival after a breast cancer diagnosis, the impact of structural racism on health, and factors that influence cognitive aging.

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

#### **Which is better, MRI or mammogram?**

It depends. Mammography works well for women of average risk. MRI is generally used for women who are at higher risk or who have dense breasts.

#### **I am 75 years old, do I need a**

**mammogram?** Because most breast cancers in older women grow slowly, many doctors do not recommend mammograms at older ages (say, after age 75) except for woman with a strong family history of breast cancer. This is a personal decision, however.

#### **What is triple negative breast cancer, and is it rare? Has treatment improved?**

Triple negative (TN) cancers test negative for three markers that determine how the cancer grows and how to treat it. TN cancer accounts for about 20% of breast cancers in Black women compared to about 10% in White women. Treatments have been less effective for TN cancer than for other types of breast cancer but are improving.

#### **What body mass index (BMI) is**

**problematic?** BMI 25-29 is classified as “overweight” by the World Health Organization, and BMI 30 or greater is classified as “obese”. Higher BMI is associated with an increased risk of many illnesses, including diabetes. However, BMI is not the only important measure of metabolic health, and it is imperfect. Physical activity and a diet high in fruits and vegetables are important contributors to good health.

#### **Why would a doctor offer genetic testing to look for breast cancer?**

Genetic testing should be offered to women with several family members who have had breast cancer, particularly if diagnosed at young ages.

*The webinar concluded with a special performance for BWHS by Sons of Serendip ([bu.edu/bwhs/25thAnniversary](http://bu.edu/bwhs/25thAnniversary)).*

# RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS

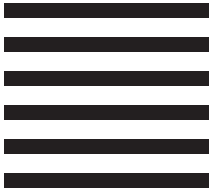
## VITAMIN D AND COVID-19 IN THE BWHS

The BWHS published the first study to show that Black women with lower blood levels of vitamin D were more likely to have become infected with COVID-19 than women with higher levels. The study was based on answers from over 10,000 participants to a COVID-19 web questionnaire and on blood samples collected during 2013-2017 from participants who were willing to donate a blood sample. Participants with “deficient” levels of vitamin D (<20ng/mL) were about one and a half times more likely to have been infected with COVID-19 than women with “sufficient” levels of vitamin D (30 or more ug/mL). Sufficient levels of vitamin D are thought to be good for

several reasons, such as for bone maintenance. If your level is less than sufficient, you might want to consult with your doctor about a vitamin D supplement, which is inexpensive and available over the counter in pharmacies and grocery stores.



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