



Berrien County Health

Department:
Preventing Disease,
Prolonging Life and
Protecting the
Health of the
Community.



Stress, Heart Disease, and African Americans

Do you know about the connection between stress and heart disease? Did you know that African Americans have a higher rate of death from heart disease than Whites? The birth of a new baby, a promotion at work, a physical illness, or bad weather can all cause stress. Stresses, from both good and bad events, affect us all. At the same time, however, not everyone has the same stressors in life. It has been shown that African Americans who experience discrimination, or feel they have been discriminated against, have a higher amount of what's called "mundane stress". A 1998 study published in Journal of Comparative Family Studies showed that the daily stress associated with racism has significant health effects and is partly responsible for the fact that African Americans are more likely to have heart problems than White Americans.

Why Stress?

Many studies show harmful effects of stress on the human body. While stress can leave a person feeling worn-out, tense, or worried, intense stress over many years can have lasting damaging effects. Stress releases hormones into the body that affect many organs. Stress hormones cause us to feel hungry, and could lead to weight problems, stress can cause hardening of the arteries or increased blood pressure, and stress increases our heart rate. All of these reactions can contribute to heart attacks or strokes. In addition, the ways people sometimes react to stress is through health-damaging behaviors like drinking alcohol or smoking.

Everyday stress can be multiplied when one feels like a second-class citizen. In general, African Americans face a wide range of racially-related stress. African Americans, are statistically more likely to live in poverty than Whites and are less likely to have access to medical care or some educational opportunities. Unfortunately, this is only made worse when some non-African Americans refuse to realize that there is a problem, or refuse to acknowledge that racism still exists today. According to a 2002 article in The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, this increases feelings of helplessness and isolation.

Did you know?

- Heart disease is the leading killer of both Whites and African Americans in the United States
- Stroke death rates are higher for African Americans than for Whites
- 41% of African American men have high blood pressure, as compared to 28% of White men
- 44% of African American women have high blood pressure, as compared to 29% of White women
- African Americans are 30% more likely than White Americans of the same age to die from heart disease

More information can be found on the Berrien County Health Department website at: www.berriencohlthdept.org/health-stats/heart-disease.htm

What Can We Do?

Though racial discrimination may, at times, leave African Americans feeling helpless, there are many things that can be done to protect health and well-being during stressful experiences. Social support, from both inside and outside of one's immediate family, counters the damaging effects of racism. Talking with understanding friends and family, of all ethnicities and beliefs, helps to release stress. Building a feeling of community in schools, workplaces, churches and neighborhoods goes a long way towards, not only finding one's strength during hard times, but also towards creating more harmonious environments in which discrimination has no place.

It has also been shown that having a positive racial identity and understanding one's cultural heritage help people deal with the discrimination they face as they go through their day. Knowing the contributions made by African Americans in all facets of American history helps both younger and older people understand their value as individuals. It is easier to combat racist ideas when one knows one's own beliefs, one's own cultural traditions, and one's own rights.

In honor of Black History Month, beginning February 1st, it is important for all of us to remember to ensure not only our own health, but also the health of each other. Learning about one another and creating safe spaces for this communication isn't only about being considerate, it's being healthy!

Healthy Hearts Month

February is Healthy Hearts month. This month, the health department will be bringing you information on Stress and Heart Disease, Heart Smart, Generations with Promise, and Healthy Lifestyles. For questions about any of these topics, please call the health department at **926-7121**.



In celebration of Black History Month, we honor the contributions of African Americans throughout our county's history.

This article was written by Brandis Belt, the new Epidemiologist at the health department. As an epidemiologist (literally meaning "the study of epidemics"), Ms. Belt will be responsible for keeping track of county health data and investigating disease outbreaks of unusual health trends.

The Berrien County Health Department has five locations to serve you:

Benton Harbor	M-139 Office	School Based	Niles	Three Oaks
769 Pipestone	M-139 Office	School Based	1205 N. Front St.	21 N. Elm
P.O. Box 706	2106 S. M-139	870 Colfax Ave	684-2800	756-2008
926-7121	927-5623	925-4500		

Or visit us on the web at www.berriencohlthdept.org

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