African Americans With Lupus Die Earlier Than Whites With the Disease

Biological and socioeconomic issues may worsen outcomes for Black people.

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A new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveals that lupus shortens the life span of African-Americans more than whites, reports HealthDay. Lupus is a chronic autoimmune disease that occurs when the body's immune system attacks its own tissues and organs.

For the study, researchers identified almost 1,300 people with lupus and examined the death rates associated with the disease using data from the Georgia Lupus Registry, which collects information on all residents in two of the state's counties—Fulton and DeKalb. Nearly 90% of patients were women, and 77% of patients were Black. (Lupus disproportionately affects women and minorities; young people are also more likely to be diagnosed with the disease.)

Between 2002 and 2016, scientists found that mortality was three times higher for people with lupus compared with the general population. The rate of death was 2.4 times higher for white people and 3.3 times higher for Black individuals.

In the United States, the average age of death is about 79 years old, but white people with lupus are more likely to live until about age 65 while the average age at death of Black people with lupus is 52 years old. The disease tends to be diagnosed earlier among Blacks and be more aggressive. In addition, socioeconomic factors may make matters worse.

Those living with lupus often die prematurely as a result of infections (certain medications for the condition are known to suppress the immune system), heart disease and stroke. (The latter two illnesses cause inflammation, which is linked to lupus.) Furthermore, many patients are prescribed prednisone, a drug with significant side effects that's associated with poor outcomes.

"We need to understand the differences in a more profound way," said Anca Askanase, MD, MPH, the director of the lupus center at New York-Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center in New York City, who wasn't involved in the investigation. "Right now, we don't have enough data to know how to do better, and that's frustrating for patients and as a doctor."

Askanase noted that only one new drug has been approved for lupus in the past 60

years—belimumab (Benlysta), approved in 2011—and called for more medications to treat the disease.

For more on lupus, click here.

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