Why Black Americans Are Living Longer With Lou Gehrig's Disease

Many African Americans with ALS opt for treatment with surgery that creates an opening through the neck into the windpipe.

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Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease, is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that affects nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord and is more common among whites than Black people. Now, new findings published in the journal Neurology reveal that African American patients with ALS are more likely to live longer than white patients with the disease, reports Wake Forest Baptist Health.

For the study, researchers conducted a retrospective case-controlled investigation with 49 Black people and 137 white people with ALS. Results showed that African-Americans underwent a tracheostomy at three times the rate of white patients.

A tracheostomy is a procedure that creates an opening through the neck into the windpipe to provide an airway and to remove secretions from the lungs. With the help of a ventilator, patients who undergo this surgery are able to live longer but their quality of life may be compromised. (Only 2 percent of Americans with ALS choose this surgery as an intervention.)

"Although we couldn't pinpoint why African-Americans had more tracheostomies in our study, we do know that earlier interventions, such as breathing masks, can slow down the rate of decline and provide patients more time and options for dealing with the disease," said Michael Cartwright, MD, a professor of neurology at Wake Forest Baptist Health in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and the study's lead author.

The doctor encouraged those with ALS to consider their quality of life before deciding which intervention to pursue. He concluded that physicians could help individuals make these decisions only beforehand rather than in emergency situations, which is frequently the case with tracheostomies.

Click here to learn about a drug approved by the Food and Drug Administration to treat Lou Gehrig's disease.

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