

# Black Women With Better Heart Health Have Less Cognitive Decline

Better heart health at middle age can help prevent cognitive issues such as Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

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For middle-aged Black women, better [heart health](#) may result in less [cognitive decline](#) compared with women who have poorer heart health, according to the [American Heart Association](#) (AHA).

Published in the [Journal of the American Heart Association](#), this study highlights the importance of heart health in supporting cognitive function.

“Take care of your heart, and it will benefit your brain,” said study lead author Imke Janssen, PhD, a professor of family and preventive medicine at Chicago's Rush University Medical Center, in a [news release](#). “Better cardiovascular health in women in their 40s is important to prevent later-life Alzheimer's disease [and] dementia and to maintain independent living.”

For the study, researchers compared heart health measures to Black and white women's scores on cognitive tests over a 20-year period.

The heart health standards developed by the AHA, called [Life's Essential 8](#), include weight, blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose as well as behaviors such as healthy eating, regular physical activity, not smoking and getting enough sleep.

Researchers sought to understand when the cognitive benefits of heart health begin, whether race influences these benefits and whether they affect different types of [brain function](#), according to the AHA.

The study included 363 Black and 402 white women between 42 and 52 years old from the [Study of Women's Health Across the Nation](#). Researchers analyzed processing speed among women,

which is the pace at which the brain recognizes visual and verbal information. Working memory, on the other hand, refers to the ability to remember and use small pieces of information for daily tasks.

Results showed that Black women with good heart health experienced little decline in mental processing, but Black women with poorer heart health had a 10% decrease in processing speed over 20 years. These women had scores that were worse for all risk factors, especially blood pressure and smoking.

Among white women with poorer heart health, processing speed did not decline. What's more, heart health did not affect the working memory for Black or white women, according to the AHA.

"We were surprised that we did not find results like those of past studies, which showed cognitive decline in Black and white men and women (with poorer heart health) and found cardiovascular health to be more important for white adults rather than people in Black subgroups," Janssen said. "We think these differences are due to the younger age of our participants, who began cognitive testing in their mid-40s, whereas previous studies started with adults about 10 to 20 years older."

Janssen acknowledged that the study had some limitations, including involving women from just one study site, relying on self-reported measures of heart health and not including measures that account for racial differences in access to care or the influence of structural racism on Black participants.

Authors said a clinical trial is needed to confirm whether better heart health in middle-aged Black women can slow cognitive aging.

To read more, click [#Heart Health](#). There, you'll find headlines such as "[Social Factors Influence Heart Disease in Black Americans](#)," "[About 40% of Adults Unaware of High Cholesterol](#)" and "[\\$10M Grant to Study High Blood Pressure Control in Black Adults](#)."