Black Seniors Less Likely Than Whites to Survive Common Intestinal Operation

November 22, 2011

Elderly African Americans who undergo surgery for severe diverticulitis—a possibly dangerous and painful digestive system disorder—are more likely to die or be forced to return to the hospital than white patients with the same condition, according to a new study published in *Archives of Surgery* and reported by Reuters.

For the study, researchers from Johns Hopkins School of Medicine examined Medicare inpatient data for more than 50,000 diverticulitis patients, ages 65 and older, who received emergency or elective surgery between 2004 and 2007. Diverticulitis is caused by inflammation or infection of intestinal sacs or pouches. The condition causes symptoms of severe stomach pain, nausea and vomiting and most often requires surgery in severe cases.

Findings showed even though diverticulitis occurs in about one out of four elderly Americans at some point, and is common among blacks and whites, African-American patients faced a 28 percent increased risk of death.

But why the dismal disparity? Well, scientists partly explained this by showing that two thirds of black patients underwent emergency surgery for diverticulitis compared with about 55 percent of whites. (White patients were more likely to receive elective surgery, a safer option, with a post-surgery death rate of 1 percent to 2 percent for both races.)

In addition, black seniors were more likely to have more dangerous diverticulitis emergency surgeries; their hospital stays were much longer and more expensive; and they were more likely to return to the hospitals within a month after their surgeries. Some possible explanations: Black patients tend to visit a primary care doctor less often, but are more likely to be treated in overcrowded, poorly funded hospitals. (Since the study focused on Medicare recipients, health insurance status did not explain why patients received elective or emergency treatment.)

But despite this surprise, one thing is clear, said Eric B. Schneider, PhD, an epidemiologist from the Department of Surgery at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore, and the study's leader.

“If you were being followed [by a doctor] on a regular basis and it was determined you needed to have this surgery and it was done [electively], that’s a much better way to go.”

For elderly African Americans, regular checkups with a primary care physician can mean doctors will spot diverticulitis early and can prescribe nonsurgical treatments. In the meantime, if you or someone you care for has frequent symptoms of diverticulitis, such as stomach pain, nausea, fevers or chills, bloating around the intestine and loss of appetite, check with a doctor sooner rather than later.

What’s another dangerous health disparity for African Americans? They are 13 percent less likely than whites to be admitted to quality medical facilities. Click here to read more.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/diverticulitis-emergency-surgery-21513-3932