

High Blood Pressure Common in Black Women of Childbearing Age

Researchers point to food insecurity as a driver of high blood pressure in racial and ethnic groups.

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A new study found that Black women of childbearing age were twice as likely as white women to have uncontrolled [high blood pressure](#), contributing to an increased risk for heart-related complications during [pregnancy](#).

High blood pressure affects nearly 18% of women of childbearing age, according to the 2019 National Center for Health Statistics. Left undetected and uncontrolled, it can lead to stroke or heart attack as well as preeclampsia (high blood pressure during pregnancy) and eclampsia (the onset of seizures or a coma in a pregnant woman), both of which are potentially fatal.

“Although high blood pressure is a treatable, common chronic health condition, it is a leading cause of pregnancy-related deaths and severe disease,” said senior study author Lara Kovell, MD, a cardiologist at the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School, in an [American Heart Association news release](#). “The United States has much higher rates of pregnancy-related deaths than economically similar countries, and Black women are disproportionately affected.”

For the study, published in the [Journal of the American Heart Association](#), researchers analyzed about 18 years of data and examined social factors influencing blood pressure control by race and ethnicity among women of childbearing age with high blood pressure. Researchers found that one in four Black women and one in three Latina women experienced food insecurity, defined as lacking access to sufficient food or food of an adequate quality to meet one’s basic needs.

“Food insecurity is important when thinking about high blood pressure, since sodium levels are higher in many lower-cost food options, such as canned, ultra-processed and fast foods,” Kovell said. “Moreover, food insecurity and a lack of access to healthy foods have been shown in other studies to increase the risk of high blood pressure.”

Prior research has shown that Black, Latina and Asian women have a higher risk for complications and stroke during childbirth. What’s more, Black and Latina women who experience pregnancy-induced high blood pressure are at least six times more likely to die compared with white women.

This study found that Black women of childbearing age with high blood pressure were twice as likely to have uncontrolled high blood pressure compared with white women. Black women aware of their high blood pressure diagnosis were three times more likely to have uncontrolled blood pressure.

Researchers emphasized the disparities in food security among racial and ethnic groups. For example, Black and Latina women faced higher rates of food insecurity, 25% and 32%, respectively, compared with 13% among white women.

“Questions about food insecurity and health care access should be included in the standard screening questions at hospital or clinic visits, especially among pregnant women or women planning to become pregnant,” Kovell said. “We still have a lot of work to do to understand and reverse the disparities in maternal mortality between white and Black women in the U.S.”

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