Rare Illness Threatens the Eyesight of Certain Black and Latino People

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Weight gain and obesity can trigger various health problems. But for young Black and Latino women if symptoms include migraines, a whooshing sound in the ears and sudden vision problems, idiopathic intracranial hypertension (IIH) may be the culprit, The Philadelphia Inquirer reports.

IIH, a rare disease associated with sudden weight gain and obesity, mostly affects women ages 20 to 50. (Men and children can also develop the condition.) The cause of IIH is largely unknown, but it is thought to occur when pressure in the cerebrospinal fluid that surrounds the brain becomes too high.

When this happens, individuals can experience headaches that get worse upon lying down, a whooshing noise in the ears that's in sync with one's heartbeat and blind spots or blurred or double vision triggered by potential damage to the optic nerve.

About 20 in 100,000 young women with obesity develop IIH. Also, when compared with their white peers, IIH patients are nearly four times more likely to be Black and 2.23 times more likely to be Hispanic.

In addition, since IIH occurs less frequently in women in their 40s, the condition may be linked to hormonal issues, scientists observed.

Researchers said they didn't think women of color were genetically inclined to develop the condition. Instead, they proposed that this group's increased risk of IIH seemed connected to socioeconomic factors, such as limited access to healthy food and medical care and lack of time to exercise.

A recent study from the University of Pennsylvania, for example, evaluated nearly 5,000 neuro-ophthalmology patients (223 of whom had IIH) and found that women diagnosed with the illness were nearly 50% more likely than their undiagnosed counterparts to live in so-called food swamps—neighborhoods with lots of fast-food restaurants and corner stores but few grocery stores.

What's more, experts said that as the rate of obesity has risen among all U.S. population groups—with the highest increase among Black and Latino people—so have the number of IIH

cases. However, findings show that in Black women, the disease progresses more quickly and causes greater harm to their eyesight.

Scientists stress that the sooner IIH is diagnosed and treated, the lower the risk of permanent vision damage.

Treatments for the condition include acetazolamide, a diuretic that reduces the amount of cerebrospinal fluid produced in the brain; weight loss is also recommended. According to doctors, dropping just 10% of body weight usually relieves symptoms entirely.

To learn more about safe, healthy ways to lose pounds safely and reduce your risk for a variety of weight-related illnesses, see "Good Weight Loss Advice."

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