Spirituality Among Black Adults Linked to Better Heart Health

Factoring in religious and spiritual beliefs may advance health equity for African Americans.

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New research has found that African-American adults who frequently participate in religious or spiritual activities may be more likely to have better cardiovascular health.

Published in the Journal of the American Heart Association, the study is the first to investigate the correlation between religious beliefs and spirituality and the American Heart Association's Life's Simple 7 metrics—diet, physical activity, nicotine exposure, cholesterol, blood pressure, blood sugar levels and weight. (In June, these were revised to include sleep and renamed Life's Essential 8.)

"Health professionals and researchers should acknowledge the importance of religious and spiritual influences in the lives of African Americans—who tend to be highly religious," said the study's lead author, LaPrincess C. Brewer, MD, MPH, a preventive cardiologist and assistant professor of medicine in an American Heart Association (AHA) news release. "With religious and spiritual beliefs factored into our approaches, we may make major breakthroughs in fostering the relationship between patients and physicians and between community members and scientists to build trust and sociocultural understanding of this population."

Researchers analyzed responses from nearly 3,000 African-American participants regarding religiosity, spirituality and the Simple 7 cardiovascular health indicators. Participants were 54 years old, on average; 66% were women.

Those who reported attending church, praying in private and "feeling God's presence" more frequently were more likely to have optimal cardiovascular health than those who reported taking part in religious activities less frequently.

More frequently attending religious services or activities was linked to a 16% increase in the odds of meeting intermediate or ideal metrics for physical activity, while religious coping and spirituality were respectively associated with an 18% and 11% increase in the odds of meeting the metrics for physical activity.

"I was slightly surprised by the findings that multiple dimensions of religiosity and spirituality were

associated with improved cardiovascular health across multiple health behaviors that are extremely challenging to change, such as diet, physical activity and smoking," Brewer said.

"Our findings highlight the substantial role that culturally tailored health promotion initiatives and recommendations for lifestyle change may play in advancing health equity," she continued. "The cultural relevance of interventions may increase their likelihood of influencing cardiovascular health and also the sustainability and maintenance of healthy lifestyle changes."

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