Study Finds Potential Cause of Racial Disparity Affecting Congenital Heart Disease

The unique study analyzed infants and their mothers.

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Congenital heart disease (CHD) impacts 1 in 100 live births, making it the most common birth defect. African Americans are 1.4 times more likely and Latinos are 1.7 times more likely to die of CHD within the first year of life compared with whites.

While race was already been known to affect health outcomes for infants with CHD, pediatric cardiologists recently discovered connections between maternal health and outcomes for infants of color with CHD.

“We’ve known for a couple decades now that outcomes are worse in minority groups compared with their white counterparts,” John Costello, MD, pediatric cardiologist and director of research for the MUSC Children’s Health Pediatric & Congenital Heart Center, said in a news release. “But it really has never been understood why these differences in outcomes exist.”

In the Journal of Pediatrics, Costello and first-generation Latina physician Stephanie Santana, MD, and colleagues reported that the state of the mother’s health during pregnancy may partially account for disparities in the health outcomes of CHD patients.

Their novel study included the mothers of infants with CHD. This is important because the condition develops in utero. “The journey of a child or adolescent or patient with congenital heart disease doesn’t start at birth,” Santana said. “It starts in that mother-baby unit and all the influences and factors that negatively or positively impact that environment.”

The study analyzed the records of over 8,000 infants and their mothers from diverse populations in California. Researchers found that 25% of the disparity in CHD outcomes in Blacks and 18% of the disparity among Latinos was linked to placental and metabolic syndromes and related conditions experienced by the mother. Some of these conditions include high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and obesity.

“One of the first steps is naming these factors and showing that there is a difference,” said Santana. “Whether we change that factor by removing it, by educating mothers about it or by treating them with different medications, I think it opens the door.”

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