Uterine Fibroids: Can Lifestyle Changes Help?

After enduring severe fibroid symptoms for almost four years, Melissa Muganzo Murphy, 34, treated the condition holistically.

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Although there is very little research to confirm that alternative treatments for uterine fibroids are effective, many experts believe that some lifestyle changes, such as eating a healthful diet, getting regular exercise and using relaxation techniques, can enhance a person's quality of life and help improve some of the symptoms associated with fibroids, such as painful periods, pelvic pain and heavy menstrual bleeding.

In a chat with Real Health, Melissa Muganzo Murphy, 34, an actress and filmmaker and a supporter of the nonprofit organization Fibroid Fighters Foundation, discusses her experience using alternative methods to relieve the symptoms of fibroids, noncancerous growths that affect between 20% and 80% of women before age 50. The condition disproportionately affects African-American people who have wombs. The conversation has been lightly edited for clarity.

Real Health: How much did you know about fibroids before you were diagnosed?

Melissa Muganzo Murphy: I knew nothing about fibroids. While growing up as a teenager, I experienced heavy bleeding during my menstrual cycle. But it wasn't until I took birth control in college that my period went from heavy to unbearable. Doctors recommended multiple versions of birth control to try to regulate my cycle. But my period got worse—so much so that I ended up bleeding for six months straight. At the time, I was 23, and I decided to ask family and friends if they had experienced this before. Thankfully, there was a family friend who was a nurse practitioner who told me that, based on my symptoms, she was sure I had fibroids.

Did you find out if other female family members ever experienced the same symptoms you had?

It's interesting, because, particularly in our Black families, when we talk about illnesses or

traumas, those are things that sometimes are built around shame or guilt. People just kind of suppress those stories or tell them in an offhand way. I heard that I had a second cousin who always experienced bad periods. She would bleed for months at a time. But that was all I learned from conversations at home. My other family members had never heard of fibroids. They had heard of hysterectomies, but they never heard of fibroids.

What other symptoms did you experience because of fibroids?

My fibroids weren't large enough to give me pelvic pain, but they extended my menstrual cycle. My iron levels were extremely low, and I developed cystic acne, which caused dark, deep scarring acne. I began thinking that if I changed the topical products I used, maybe it would go away. But internally, there was also all this dysfunction. I experienced horrendous cramps and headaches and back pains that affected my lower spine. There was also a lot of clotting, which I normalized because I thought that periods were supposed to be heavy. I believed that until I asked other people who told me they don't experience those symptoms. I was wearing overnight pads in the daytime plus an ultra-tampon and changing those every hour at night.

What advice did the nurse practitioner give you?

She suggested I try a holistic cleanse. I planned to visit an ob-gyn to learn more about what was going on, but at that time, I was going away for a graduate fellowship for the summer, so I decided to do the cleanse during that time. I went through this three-month cleanse that included drinking black cohosh and raspberry tea. I also went completely vegan, and I stopped drinking juice, soda and alcohol. The result was that my period went from eight days to two, and I didn't have cramps anymore. I lost 20 pounds, and my acne cleared up. It was just mind-blowing to me that by doing this, my body was able to reset and recalibrate. I was also able to get herbs from my godmother who is a clinical herbalist. I'm West Indian and Kenyan, so I grew up taking herbs and wasn't new to the idea that natural products can help to heal the body. This cleanse was drastic, but I think my body responded well to this regimen. That's how I treated fibroids in my body the first time.

After you did the cleanse, what did you notice?

My bleeding wasn't heavy anymore. I didn't have any more clotting and cramping, and my cycle lasted only two days. I also didn't have to wear overnight pads. It was mind-blowing to me that such traumatic symptoms can be addressed by what you're putting in your body, especially because I was taught that these symptoms were normal.

Did your fibroid symptoms stay gone?

My symptoms resolved for the summer. But after I returned home and resumed my lifestyle—eating meat again, experiencing stress at work—the symptoms slowly started to come back. Then, three years later, I started bleeding heavily again over several months. I remember telling my wife that I wish I wasn't so stubborn because I had previously healed this condition.

When I went to my doctor, I begged for a hysterectomy. She told me, "One day, you're gonna have a husband, and he's gonna want children, so if you can't produce that for him then what good is that gonna be for you?" So she denied me having the procedure.

So here I was a queer Black woman being told that one day this invisible guy is gonna want me to birth children, and that just was not the case. This happened 10 years ago. I learned that even if somebody has good intentions, there are still biases internalized by some doctors. I did not think her attitude was necessarily a gender challenge, but I felt like it was race-based and systemic in this medical system.

To me, part of this attitude was also rooted in ageism because I felt they were looking at me and thinking, You're young, what do you know about your body? The doctor also said, "I don't want you to regret this." I didn't know if perhaps prior patients were upset about the procedure. But I had literally said, "I have no interest in birthing children at all. I am a queer Black woman." Those statements should have been indicators for her that I had thought about this decision, which should be up to the patient.

Once your symptoms returned, what did you do?

At that point, I became a vegan full-time. I believed I needed to go back to what initially corrected the course of my condition. I started entering different trials for lifestyle solutions to fibroids because that is what healed me. For a lot of people who are born and raised in Western medicine, only a medical doctor can offer effective treatment, and if not, they refuse to believe that any other modalities, such as Eastern, African or some other Indigenous practice, can be helpful in addressing fibroids, so those methods aren't supported.

I remember telling my new primary care physician that when I eat red meat my periods are terrible; when I have sugar, I'm like cramping out of this world and have to curl up in a fetal position. Because my iron was low, they would tell me, "You really should up your red meat." This is despite me telling them what happens when I ingest these things. They just could not make a connection between what you put in your body and how that affects your hormonal system. In the hospital, I was never referred to an endocrinologist, which is a hormone doctor. I was never offered

ultrasounds. I had to request these tests myself to see what was going on.

At what age did your condition improve?

I was 27 when I finally found the right combination. I'm really into herbs and minerals, so I'm a huge fan of herbalism. I take herbs monthly, and I also am into clinical hydrotherapy, something I use for internal cleansing. I don't eat dairy or red meat, and I'm really careful of how much sugar I ingest. My diet is structured in a way that works for me.

At Fibroid Fighters events, what have you learned when you speak and interact with other women and hear about their experiences?

I always thought that my story was like one of one, but when you go to these events or you just connect with other Fibroid Fighters, I think my experiences are soft compared to what has happened to others. People have been on ventilators, have had infusions, have coded or have had miscarriages or babies with varying abilities because of the size of their fibroids. It's just amazing to me that people in the medical field are not talking about fibroids more because the condition is so common.

What can you tell us about your documentary, The Big Hysto: A Black Womb Revolution?

I went to undergrad at UC Davis, and I went to graduate school at California State University, Sacramento. But as a child, I was a huge entertainer—dancing since I was 8 years old, choreographing since I was 13 and putting on shows since I was 15. I've traveled with singing groups, been a showrunner and acted in college, so all of that foundational work is what led me to be confident enough to put together a documentary. I learned along the way, but it's not like I studied film. But I was able to connect with people on my team who had that background in film. I had the creative vision, I could direct and I could produce. But as far as capturing the footage, I knew that I was going to need help doing that.

The Big Hysto is literally my entertainment baby. I finally understand when artists are about to launch something or release something on a massive scale. This is such a sensitive and vulnerable time yet such an exhilarating place to be. Yeah. Cause you're just like on pins and needles, like, Do you hate it? Do you love it? Do you want more? The film is all about people who have negotiated the medical system and experienced present-day medical racism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia. The documentary is to remind people that these situations are presently still occurring and we're all still dealing with the aftermath of how the medical system got started in the United States, which is off the backs of people who identify as Black and native and Indigenous

people.

There were experiments done and perfected on tons of people from these population groups, with results that supported wider audiences. Those research studies and their racist rhetoric are embedded into health systems, their policies and procedures, and this research and data are still negatively impacting people today.

The film features clinicians from Western medicine, holistic medicine and social workers. It was important for all of this to be presented so we can call out what's going on and talk about examples of how racism continues in health care.

What is your goal with the work and advocacy that you're doing?

I honestly feel like our job in society is to help people remember their power. Instead of people feeling hopeless, I hope people feel encouraged to organize and to activate their inner power and remember that policies can be changed. People have way more agency than we give ourselves credit for.

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