Widespread Differences in Heart Disease Risk Among Blacks of Different Ethnicities

Compared with Black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, African immigrants have lower rates of high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity.

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There are extensive social and cultural differences between African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans and African immigrants. Additionally, new findings presented at the American Heart Association's (AHA) Epidemiology and Prevention | Lifestyle and Cardiometabolic Health Scientific Sessions 2020, show that heart disease risk factors, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, smoking, overweight and obesity, vary significantly among these population groups, according to a press release from the AHA.

For the investigation, researchers studied 82,000 non-Hispanic Blacks and 370,000 whites who participated in the National Health Interview Survey from 2010 through 2018. (The poll is a nationally representative in-person survey conducted each year in Spanish and English.)

Scientists discovered distinctions among the three different ethnic classifications for Black Americans and compared them with whites for all four heart disease risk factors studied: high blood pressure, diabetes, excess weight and smoking.

Results showed that the prevalence of high blood pressure was 17% among African immigrants, 32% among Afro-Caribbeans, 42% among African Americans and 34% among whites. Smoking prevalence was 5% among African immigrants, 8% among Afro-Caribbeans, 18% among Black Americans and 16% among whites.

In addition, diabetes prevalence was 9% among African immigrants, 19% among Afro-Caribbeans, 15% among Black Americans and 10% among whites. Overweight and obesity was 60% among African immigrants, 68% among Afro-Caribbeans, 76% among African Americans and 66% among whites.

Researchers also accounted for socioeconomic factors and found that African immigrants were more likely than Afro-Caribbeans, African Americans and white Americans to be college educated. Interestingly, this same group was also less likely to have health insurance.

Overall, African immigrants had significantly lower risk factors for heart disease risk compared with Black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. Researchers attributed this to environmental, psychological and social differences among these groups.

“Our results suggest that although racial disparities in heart disease risk factors exist, ethnic disparities among Blacks need to be addressed to ensure that health care delivery and public health strategies are properly tailored to these populations,” said Diana Baptiste, DNP, RN, a certified nurse educator and assistant professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing in Baltimore and the study’s lead author.

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