

Colon Cancer: Factors Affecting Access & Outcomes

The tragic death of Chadwick Boseman at age 43 from colon cancer has helped to ignite a conversation about the disease, its changing trends and the additional challenges it poses for African Americans.

Insights from Thomas Slavin, M.D., Senior Vice President of Medical Affairs, Myriad Oncology

Am I too young to worry about colorectal cancer?

The majority of colorectal cancer cases occur in older adults; however, incidence rates have been on the rise in adults ages 20-39 since the mid-1980s and in adults ages 40-54 since the mid-1990s, with the steepest increases occurring in the younger age groups.¹ While reasons for this disturbing trend remain unknown, changes in lifestyle, diet or other factors may play a role.

Do cultural norms and social bias against African Americans influence health?

In the United States, the continuing problem of disparities in healthcare for African Americans compared to other populations are well documented.

There are several factors that contribute to African Americans having a higher risk of being diagnosed with advanced stage colorectal cancer and a higher risk of cancer related death. Even after adjusting for access, the outcome is the same.² Other contributing factors are:

- Doctors fail to equally recommend screening colonoscopy and other treatments to African American patients compared to European American patients.
- Cultural factors influence risk and prevention practices such as: stigma of colonoscopy, diet, and the idea of cancer fatality and fear of the medical system.
- African Americans have a propensity to develop right sided colon polyps and preference of a flexible sigmoidoscopy over colonoscopy will miss these lesions.³

Access to healthcare is one of many factors in the use of preventive and early detection services as well as cancer treatment and support. In the United States, insurance coverage and healthcare access are closely related. Individuals without health insurance are more likely to be diagnosed with advanced cancer and have a higher risk of cancer death compared to those who are privately insured.^{4,5,6} In 2017, only 57% of Black Americans (or African Americans) had private insurance, compared to 73% of White Americans (or European Americans).⁷

Nearly 20,000 new cases of colorectal cancer were expected in the United States among African Americans in 2020, with incidence rates 24 percent higher in Black men and 19 percent higher in Black women, compared to other, according to the American Cancer Society.⁸ Additionally, African Americans have a 35% higher death rate than White Americans with colorectal cancer.⁹

How important is early diagnosis?

The five-year survival rate is 90% for patients diagnosed with early-stage disease, but declines significantly when diagnosed in later stages.^{10,11} Factors associated with advanced-stage colorectal cancer diagnosis include low socio-economic level, African ancestry, and young age.^{12,13}

Is colon cancer hereditary?

It's estimated that up to 10 percent of colon cancers are hereditary. Having a family member(s) with colon cancer increases one's risk of developing the disease. Early screening and genetic testing to determine if an individual carries a mutation that increases the risk of colon cancer may be appropriate for this population.¹⁴

Next steps...

Clearly, there is a significant need to improve disease awareness, offer strategies for prevention, and provide screening options, including genetic testing, to African Americans.

Because patients and their families use test results to make life-saving medical decisions, Myriad Genetics promises to provide affordable access to testing, a lifetime commitment to accurate results, and comprehensive support for all appropriate patients and their families.

Remember, it's never too early to start a conversation about cancer prevention. To see if you may be a good candidate for hereditary genetic testing please take our Myriad Genetics' cancer quiz:

<https://www.hereditarycancerquiz.com/> and discuss the results with your healthcare professional.

References

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