

## A Guide to Managing Your Health

### Black and African American Older Adults



**A**s an older Black/African American person, this pamphlet is for you and your family, whether you or your family were born in the US or are immigrants from Caribbean or African countries. As a member of this culture, you might have a greater risk for some diseases. This increased risk could be due to longstanding social, health system, and environmental factors, including experiencing racism and discrimination in the medical system, in addition to individual health behaviors and genetics. The most frequent causes of death for older Black/African American women are heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease. For Black/African American older men, the most common causes of death are cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and lung diseases.

Your healthcare providers need to be familiar with your cultural beliefs and practices. At your health care visits, please let your healthcare providers know your health needs, beliefs, and questions. Your healthcare providers want to give you the best care possible and keep you healthy.

### Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Black/African Americans

#### Heart Disease and Stroke

High blood pressure, heart failure, diabetes, obesity, smoking, and lack of physical activity increase your risk for having a heart attack or stroke. If you have chest pain and/or shortness of breath, you might be having a heart attack. If so, you need to be evaluated in the nearest emergency room. Strokes occur when blood supply to the brain is blocked or stopped. Brain cells can die within minutes. If you have trouble speaking, weakness on one side of your body, severe headache, or loss of vision or balance,

please call 911 immediately. Eating foods low in fat and getting daily exercise can reduce the chances of having heart disease, strokes and/or heart failure. Talk to your healthcare provider about eating healthy eating, decreasing salt and fat in your diet, exercising, quitting smoking, controlling blood pressure, and taking recommended medications. Following these instructions can reduce your chance of having or improve symptoms of heart disease, strokes, and heart failure.

## Diabetes

Diabetes is a serious disease that causes high blood sugar levels. Having diabetes for a long time leads to other health problems. If diabetes is not controlled, this disease can damage your eyes, kidneys, and heart. Being overweight or obese, eating certain foods like fried foods, burgers, and fries, drinking juices and soda/pop, and doing little or no exercise can cause or make diabetes worse. Talk with your healthcare provider about a healthier diet, exercise, and medications. Some healthy diet tips include decreasing carbohydrates in your diet like white bread and pasta, eating more vegetables, drinking water (preferred) or sugar-free beverages, and eating low calorie foods. Try to increase your exercise to 30 minutes per day five days a week. Your healthcare provider will check your blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol, and kidney function. If you have diabetes, check your feet daily and report any skin breakdown to your healthcare provider immediately. You should have your eyes checked every 1 to 2 years.

## Obesity

Eating more food than your body needs leads to being overweight or obese. Diets high in fats, carbohydrates like pies and cookies, sodas and sugary drinks, fried soul food, and rich gravies cause people to gain weight. Little or no exercise, sleep problems, and poor eating habits lead to weight gain. Being overweight or obese can lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, stroke, heart disease, sleep apnea, and even cancer. Obesity can make breathing worse and cause more arthritis pain, making it harder to walk. It can be hard to afford healthy foods. Some ways to lose weight are to stop drinking soda/pop, decrease fried foods, decrease your food intake by 500 calories each day, and eat more fruits and vegetables. Walking for 30 minutes a day, five days a week is recommended. Resistance exercises such as lifting weights are important to avoid muscle loss. You could join a silver sneakers exercise program. Some insurance programs will cover this exercise program. A physical therapist can create a good exercise plan with you. Free exercise videos can be found on the internet that can help you develop an exercise program

at home. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to lose weight and improve your fitness and quality of life. A dietitian, a person trained in healthy nutrition, can evaluate what you usually eat and help you create a healthier diet.

## Tobacco and Marijuana Use

Tobacco contains chemicals that are bad for your health. Smoking can cause cancer, lung disease, high blood pressure, and strokes. Smoking marijuana can cause the heart to beat faster and increases blood pressure. When you smoke around your family and friends, they breathe in your smoke and can get health problems from second-hand smoke. Children who live with people who smoke can develop asthma. E-cigarettes (vaping) and smokeless tobacco (chewing gum, snuff tobacco) also cause serious health problems. Stopping smoking is very important. People in their 80's and 90's still benefit from quitting smoking. Nicotine is addictive and it can be hard to stop. Your healthcare provider and pharmacists can discuss ways to successfully quit smoking. For some people, support groups are helpful. 1-800-QUIT-NOW is a toll-free number operated by the National Cancer Institute that will connect you directly to your state's tobacco quit line support system. Medications also are available to help you stop smoking.

## Breathing disorders

Asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema, chronic bronchitis, and sleep apnea are common in Black/African Americans. Smoking is the most common cause of breathing disorders. If you smoke, the best thing you can do is to quit and stay away from people who are smoking. Air pollutants can make your breathing worse also. Medications and exercise can improve your breathing. Healthcare providers and pharmacists can show you how to use your inhalers correctly.

## Cancer

Black/African American people are more likely to die from cancer than other racial and ethnic groups. These deaths are due to many reasons including limited access to healthcare and high costs, lack of cancer screenings,

and health disparities (health differences between different groups of people). Breast, lung, prostate, and colon cancers are the most common. Limiting alcohol use, stopping smoking, and eating a diet low in salt and fat can decrease your risk of getting cancer. Discovering cancer early also leads to better outcomes. Sometimes waiting too long to discuss new symptoms with a healthcare provider makes disease more difficult to treat. By then, the cancer might be worse and more advanced. During clinic visits, your healthcare provider can screen for cancer and detect it earlier. Please make an appointment with your healthcare provider as soon as possible, especially if you feel a lump in your breast or develop new shortness of breath or an ongoing cough.

### Depression and mental illness

Depression and severe sadness are not caused by getting older. These symptoms can be due to chemical imbalances in your brain. Depression is a serious health condition and can lead to other health problems. For some older adults, sadness is not the main symptom. Depressive symptoms can include feeling tired or irritable, lacking interest in hobbies and activities you used to enjoy, having trouble sleeping or sleeping too long, and having a poor appetite. Confusion and problems with thinking can be due to depression and might look like Alzheimer's disease. If you have depressive symptoms, especially if you have thoughts of hurting yourself or others, talk to your healthcare provider who can recommend counseling and medications. Family members and friends can support you when you are depressed.

Sometimes shame and stigma prevent Black/African Americans from seeking mental health care. These illnesses are diseases like heart or lung diseases and need to be treated. Medications and behavior therapy are very effective and can help you feel better.

### Alzheimer's disease and dementia

Memory loss and dementia are not a normal part of aging. Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia are the most common types of dementia. Diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, high cholesterol, depression, smoking, hearing loss, and little or no exercise can

increase your risk of developing dementia. In the beginning, people forget things that happened within the last week or month, known as short-term memory loss. They also ask the same questions over and over. However, their long-term memory can still be very good. Older adults might forget about an upcoming doctor's appointment but be able to tell great stories about growing up. As people's memory gets worse, they have difficulty doing certain activities such as driving, taking their medications, and paying bills. As this dementia gets worse, some older adults have behavior changes. Family members will need to help older adults with daily activities like eating, bathing, and dressing. If you notice that you or your loved ones show signs of worsening memory, talk to your healthcare provider. Understanding dementia will help you be a better caregiver. Some treatments could slow memory loss. Many resources are available for this disease. Your healthcare provider and social workers are here to connect you to these treatments and resources.

### Preventive Health

Preventing or discovering disease early rather than waiting until the disease has caused damage to your body is best. At first, some diseases start with no symptoms, so you might not know you have the disease. Your healthcare provider has more information than your family and friends, so please seek medical advice early. Seeing your healthcare provider at least once a year will help identify diseases early so that they are easier to treat. Diseases identified early, especially cancers, can have better results. Your healthcare provider will discuss cancer screenings with you. Some common screening tests are mammograms, prostate exams, and colonoscopies. Vaccinations including flu, pneumonia, shingles, and COVID-19 shots can prevent serious infections. If you are concerned about getting vaccinations, ask your healthcare provider for more information. Working with your healthcare provider will improve your health. Let your healthcare provider and pharmacists know if you take home remedies, herbal agents, vitamins, and supplements to make sure these therapies are safe to take with your other medications and treatments.

## Communicating With Your Healthcare Team

Your healthcare team will want to know about you and your culture, and what is important to you! You will receive the best care by being open and honest with your healthcare providers about your cultural beliefs and customs, because they can have a major impact on your health. Let your healthcare providers know if you:

- Fast on holy days or during Ramadan. Your medications might need to be changed during fasting.
- Have long-standing friends that are like family members, known as fictive kin. Tell your healthcare providers about these important people in your life and if you want them to be part of your family healthcare decision team.
- Take care of grandchildren.
- Believe your health problems are a punishment from God.
- Believe in the fate/will of God for your medical conditions.
- Believe your health condition is from something evil, such as voodoo or a hex.
- Are concerned that the healthcare system might perform experiments on you without your consent.
- Have experienced racism or discrimination in previous medical care.
- Have trust concerns with the American health system.
- Do not want certain family members and fictive kin to know about your medical conditions.
- Want someone (family member, fictive kin, or friend) to make healthcare decisions for you.
- Are hesitant about discussing disability or end of life care.
- Use prayer to treat your health condition.
- Are affected by spirits in a good or bad way.
- Work with another healer such as a priest, minister, root doctor, or voodoo priest or priestess.

**We hope this information has been helpful to you.  
Be sure to let your healthcare providers know if you  
or your family members have any questions.**



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The AGS Health in Aging Foundation is dedicated to improving the health, independence, and quality of life of all older people. We aim to empower older adults and caregivers to actively participate in their health care and decision-making.

*DISCLAIMER:* This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other healthcare provider. Always consult your healthcare provider about your medications, symptoms, and health problems. December 2021

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