

Why are African American Women Hit Hardest by Fibroids?

For most women, the chance of developing uterine fibroids at some point in their life is very likely. **If you are an African American woman**, you are almost three times as likely to develop uterine fibroids or adenomyosis than a woman of any other race. You are also likely to develop them at an earlier age and may have more significant symptoms, like heavy menstrual bleeding, pelvic pain, and anemia. While the prevalence of fibroids among African-American women is well known, the causes are less clear. What is the reason for this startling statistic? The truth is that the overwhelming prevalence of fibroids in African American women likely comes from a combination of social and biological factors.

African American Women and Fibroid Risk Factors

There is no guaranteed way to avoid developing uterine fibroids. There are, however, certain factors that tend to increase the risk of developing fibroids more for African American women than women of other ethnicities.

These risk factors include:

1. HEREDITY

There may be some genetic element that increases this tendency among African American women. If your mother had uterine fibroids, you are three times more likely to develop them yourself.

2. DIET AND OBESITY

Obesity and the diet that leads to being overweight have been linked by some studies to the development of uterine fibroids (*Blount, L.G., et al., 2019*), more so in African American women. According to the *Office on Women's Health*, women who are obese are two to three times more likely to develop uterine fibroids (*Boyd, N.F., et al. 1999*).

The same is true for women whose diet includes a lot of red meat (especially ham and beef). Some scientists think

that this could be due to the fact that red meat is also linked to a rise in estrogen, a hormone that can feed the growth of fibroids.

It is not proven that adopting a healthy diet will prevent you from developing fibroids, but it definitely cannot hurt. Pretty much every professional nutritionist recommends eating plenty of what scientists call “protective” foods, such as green vegetables, fruit, and fish for better health and for disease prevention. Uterine fibroids are not an exception.

3. AGE OF FIRST PERIOD AND FIBROIDS

One of the things that researchers are most sure about when it comes to the causes of fibroids in the uterus, is that estrogen and progesterone contribute to their growth. Women who start to menstruate earlier are exposed to these hormones for a longer period of time. About 62 percent of young African American girls begin menstruating by the time they turn 12, while only 35 percent of white girls do the same (*Chumlea, W.C., et al., 2003*). This early start of menstruation could be one reason why African American women suffer disproportionately from fibroids.

4. ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

According to evidence gathered from the Black Women's Health Study, there is a link between consuming alcohol

(particularly beer) and the development of uterine fibroids in black women (Wise, L.A., et al., 2004). If you are concerned about the risk of developing fibroids, you should reduce your alcohol intake (especially beer) to once a week or less.

5. HAIR RELAXER USAGE

One of the most unusual and possibly controversial explanations of the high prevalence of fibroids and adenomyosis in black women seems to be the use of hair relaxers. It has been proven that the chemicals from relaxers make their way into the body through the burns in the scalp that are pretty much inevitable with this very common hair treatment that is extremely popular among African American women. Some hair relaxers contain phthalates. These chemicals can interfere with the endocrine system, which regulates the hormones. Levels of phthalates that can be detected in a woman's urine have been associated with an increased risk of developing uterine fibroids. The FDA does not regulate hair relaxers, making this theory harder to prove.

6. LACK OF VITAMIN D

Vitamin D can be found in dairy products and is naturally produced by the body in response to sunlight exposure. Proper amounts of vitamin D can strengthen the immune system and prevent the production of tissues that lead to fibroid development. As a result, getting enough vitamin D through diet and sunshine can help lower your risk of developing fibroids and related fibroid symptoms.

Vitamin D insufficiency is more prevalent among African Americans (Mayer, J., et al., 2006), and in North America, most young and healthy black men and women do not achieve optimal vitamin D concentrations at any time of year. This is primarily due to the fact that pigmentation reduces vitamin D production in the skin. Studies have shown that vitamin D has the ability to regulate the immune system and may limit the production of fibrous tissue by fibroid cells, thus preventing fibroids from developing – so make sure you are getting an adequate amount of vitamin D in your diet and from exposure to sunlight. Many scientists think that it is virtually impossible to get sufficient amounts of vitamin D from diet and sunlight and that vitamin D supplements are necessary to maintain a proper level of this vital nutrient.

More Attention to the Issue is Needed from Both Doctors and Patients

Despite struggling with daily activities, enduring long and painful periods, and experiencing intrusive pain during sex, African American women who suffer from fibroids do not receive the attention they deserve from the medical community.

It doesn't help that many African American women frequently consider even the most severe fibroid symptoms to be normal. If every female member of your family suffered from long periods, intense menstrual pain, and anemia, would you think that your symptoms required medical treatment, or would you think that they were just an unfortunate part of being a woman?

Because African American women frequently do not consider their symptoms to be a problem requiring medical attention, they wait up to four years before seeking treatment for their fibroid pain. When the women suffering the most from fibroids are the least likely to seek treatment, it is no surprise that a cure for uterine fibroids tends to be low on medical researchers' priority list.

High Rates of Hysterectomies Among African American Women

Hysterectomy rates among African American women are more than double in comparison to any other ethnic group, with the majority performed to treat benign conditions like fibroids or adenomyosis. Yes, it is true, that black women's fibroid tumors tend to be larger and more numerous, therefore requiring surgical treatment. But the results of a 2014 study published in American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology also attribute it to the fact that, more often than not, black women are given only one option for treating their fibroids: a hysterectomy that will remove the fibroids and also any hope of a future pregnancy.

Greater Awareness of All Available Treatment Options is Sorely Needed

It is clear that there is a need to raise awareness in the African American community that a variety of fibroid treatments is available and that these treatments can be tailored to the individual patient's needs and unique circumstances.

Greater awareness and interest in a variety of treatment options will no doubt lead to greater interest in research from the medical community. Through awareness, collaboration, and education, it is possible to create an environment where African American women who suffer from fibroids and a similar condition called adenomyosis have access to information and all the available treatment options. Progress also involves women educating themselves about fibroids, becoming their own health advocates and not accepting surgery as the only option.

Viva Eve Can Help!

While no woman can completely eliminate her risk of developing fibroids, you can lower it by being aware of your risk factors, and by doing what you can to control them. And, even if you have or later do develop uterine fibroids, you do not have to live with fibroid pain forever!

If you suspect that you have fibroids or adenomyosis or have already been diagnosed, schedule a consultation with a fibroid specialist to learn more about your options. Treating your fibroids doesn't necessarily mean undergoing a complicated surgical procedure – there are minimally invasive, safe, and effective alternatives to surgery.

Viva Eve specializes in the treatment of both uterine fibroids and adenomyosis. We provide high-quality, personalized

care for each and every patient we see. We start each patient relationship with the goal of always recommending the course of treatment that is best for the patient and her circumstances.

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