

CULTURAL AWARENESS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS and HEALTH FACTSHEET

African Americans’ cultural beliefs and values influence how people cope with sickness, disease and stress. 1 African Americans are concerned about their health and are very interested in receiving culturally competent care. 3,4.

RELIGION

The African American Church has been” a strong social and religious force of unity (Giger et al., 2008).2
The connection of Spirituality and the church are essential to the health status of African Americans. *See “Spiritual Care of African Americans” Factsheet for additional information and resources.*

FAMILY

Family is the center of the African American Community. Immediate and extended family may attend medical appointments with loved ones. Healthcare decisions may include the wishes of the individual and the family. African Americans also have a strong sense of shared community.

DIET & HEALTH

- African Americans have cultural and historical factors that contribute to their present dietary practices. 5
- *Accessibility, availability, affordability and acceptability* influence diet choices
- Poverty and limited access to grocery stores influence food options.
- “Eating healthy” means giving up something that belongs to the populations’ cultural heritage.
- Family and friends be found to be non-supportive when trying to make dietary changes.6

TIPS FOR PROVIDERS:

- ✚ Advocate that all **foods** can fit into a healthy diet and that foods should not be thought of as being 'good' or 'bad'
- ✚ Recognize the cultural value of traditional African American **foods**, they should not be eliminated from the diet, but rather should be eaten less frequently, in smaller amounts,
- ✚ Modified recipes to reduce sodium, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sugar
- ✚ Refer overweight and obese individuals for medical nutrition therapy (MNT)
- ✚ Partnering with the faith community for health education and promotion activities.5

LANGUAGE and COMMUNICATION

African Americans dominant language is English, however, being as culturally diverse as they are providers may think that due to a person’s skin tone that every patient encountered will speak the same language, same diction or dialect. However, African Americans are known to have a style of speaking based on social and cultural factors. African American English, Black English, Ebonics, Black Vernacular English and African American English are a few terms that linguist describe for speech categories.7,8 This can present challenges when communicating with providers.

- Patients may have low literacy which can affect health literacy.
- Some people have high literacy, but low health literacy.
- Low health literacy contributes to poor communication between providers and their patients.5
- Patients may try to hide their limited health understanding because of shame or embarrassment.9

- Providers should have patients **“teach back”** key points about their health and treatment plan. can be aware during patient engagement that the message being communicated is understood.

- **Teach Back Method:** <https://www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/quality-resources/tools/literacy-toolkit/healthlittoolkit2-tool5.html>
- **Ask Me Three:** <http://www.ihl.org/resources/Pages/Tools/Ask-Me-3-Good-Questions-for-Your-Good-Health.aspx>
- **Let’s TALK:** <https://www.ihs.gov/healthcommunications/health-literacy/letstalk/>
- **Universal Precautions Toolkit:** <https://www.ahrq.gov/health-literacy/quality-resources/tools/literacy-toolkit/index.html>

TRUST and MEDICAL CARE

African Americans are becoming more health conscious and engage in healthcare through regular health screenings and treatments of care. Historical injuries to the African American population, such as the Tuskegee Institute experiments, affect how particular generations engage the healthcare system.¹² The perception of mistrust in the African American community for the most part has been caused by previous and recent experiences with the health care system.¹⁰ Upon entering into the healthcare system, normally due to necessity, held beliefs impact the patient’s course of treatment. Many African Americans believe that they personally will be mistreated in health care because of their race and indicate a lack of cultural competency in healthcare.^{10,11} In addition, the lack of quality care and access to health care, communicates an added mistrust of the healthcare system.¹⁰ There may be some initial reluctance prior to disclosing information due to held beliefs of mistrust.¹² Establishing a caring and trusting relationship is very important when providing care to African Americans.



Tips for Increasing Provider-Patient Communication

- Enlisting a patient-centered approach to culturally competent care
- Establish a trusting relationship with patients
- Engage in health practices that are individualized to the specific needs of each person and / or population
- Increase knowledge of the cultural context of your patient population
- Listening to their needs to include issues surrounding social determinants of health
- Cultivating cultural humility

Resources and References

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