

# CULTURAL AWARENESS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS and HEALTH FACTSHEET

Cultural awareness is being cognizant, observant, and conscious of similarities and differences among and between cultural groups.<sup>1</sup> As a healthcare provider it is important to know that African Americans' approach to sickness, disease and stress are often rooted in their cultural beliefs and values.<sup>2</sup> African American refers to a person of African ancestral origins who self identifies or is identified by others as African American.<sup>3</sup> African Americans are concerned about their health and receiving culturally competent is important to them.<sup>4,5</sup> Like all cultures, religion, family lifestyle, and communication are the areas where the uniqueness of the African American culture is most evident.

## RELIGION

*The African American Church has been" a strong social and religious force of unity".<sup>6</sup> 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 & LIFESTYLE

- African Americans have cultural and historical factors that contribute to their present dietary practices.<sup>7</sup>
- *Accessibility, availability, affordability and acceptability* can influence diet choices
- Poverty and limited access to grocery stores can influence food options.
- "Eating healthy" may mean giving up something that belongs to the populations' cultural heritage.

### TIPS FOR HEALTH 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.<sup>7</sup>

- Family and friends may be found to be non-supportive when trying to make dietary changes.<sup>8</sup>

## LANGUAGE and COMMUNICATION

African Americans dominant language is English; however, the African American race is comprised of individuals who are different from one another and healthcare providers may encounter various styles of speaking among African Americans. Some examples include African American English, Black English, Ebonics and Black Vernacular English and African American English.<sup>9</sup>

### Other considerations:

- 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.
- Patients may try to hide their limited health understanding because of shame or embarrassment.<sup>10</sup>
- Providers should have patients **“teach back”** key points about their health and treatment plan so the provider can be aware during patient engagement that the message being communicated is understood.

- ✚ **Tips & Resources for Providers for Increasing Patient Health Literacy**
- ✚ **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. Past treatment of African Americans by the scientific community has influenced the attitudes and behaviors of some African Americans.<sup>11</sup> This unfortunate history has caused many African Americans to believe that they will be mistreated by health professionals. Additionally, the lack of access to high quality care and healthcare resources exacerbates the attitude of mistrust.<sup>12</sup> Healthcare providers should be aware that there may be some initial reluctance by African American patients to disclose personal information and participate in the treatment plan due to underlying feelings of mistrust.<sup>13</sup> Establishing a caring and trusting relationship is imperative when caring for African American patients.

### 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

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**For questions or additional information please contact**

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