



# **The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Women in Today's World [Encyclopedia of Women in Today's World](#)**

## **Pregnancy-Related Deaths in African American Women**

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A nationwide epidemic is underway—African American women living in the 21st century are dying because of pregnancy-related complications. Any death that occurs during pregnancy or within one year after the end of pregnancy and is caused by pregnancy-related complications is considered a pregnancy-related death. African American women who live in the most industrialized country in the world are three to four times more likely to die giving birth than either white or Latina women. Some researchers using data from the World Health Organization have said that African American women from a single state have a maternal mortality risk comparable to rates in Kazakhstan and Syria. Historically, researchers paid little attention to maternal mortality rates and fewer still to the maternal health and mortality of African American women. However, in September 2000, 183 nations, including the United States, met at the United Nations Millennium Summit and signed the Millennium Declaration, setting eight Millennium Development Goals to improve social and economic development and eliminate poverty around the world. As an indication of the importance of women's health to the well-being of countries and the world, Goal 5 is to decrease maternal mortality by 75 percent by 2015. Even in developed countries where pregnancy mortality is much lower than in resource-poor nations, many maternal deaths are considered avoidable, and deaths of women from complications of pregnancy are considered key events, a concern reiterated by the U.S. Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations in 2010. Prior to the UN Millennium Summit, the Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System was initiated in 1986 and has as its goal the identification of all deaths in the United States caused by pregnancy and its complications. This was a good start, but not enough, because the burning question still remained as to why pregnancy is so much more dangerous for African American women.

Among the many health conditions common in African American women, pregnancy-related death has been underreported, if reported at all. Researchers indicate that the pregnancy-related death numbers reported in the Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System are off because of the way women's deaths were recorded. This was partially remedied in 1999 when the recording system changed and developed a better record-keeping system. In 2003, the U.S. Revised Death Certificate was issued, which specifically asks if the decedent had been pregnant at the time of death, or pregnant within a specified time period. These changes have helped to increase the accuracy of reported pregnancy-related deaths for all women in 50 states; New York City, and Washington, D.C. These areas voluntarily provide this information to the Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System to aid in the study of pregnancy-related deaths. From 1998 through 2005, the pregnancy-related mortality ratio for the United States ranged from 12 to 16.8 pregnancy-related deaths per 100,000 live births, higher than the ratio in previous decades, with African American women continuing to experience a rate of pregnancy-related death up to four times greater than white women.

### **Complications/Causes**

Looking beyond the usual suspects of limited access to medical care, low socioeconomic status, and inadequate-to-nonexistent health insurance, poor maternal health outcomes are still more common among black women, even for those with a college education and good health insurance. Doctors have known the two major factors that impact maternal health are the mother's health status before pregnancy and the quality of healthcare she received during pregnancy at birth. A Wisconsin study surveyed African American mothers and found that perceived racism or expectations of racism often led to avoidance of prenatal care. More research is needed to fully ascertain if this is a widespread problem in other parts of the United States. The missing link in this equation is the impact of environmental stress and psychological well-being. Some studies have found that race and quality of care also factor

into the maternal mortality rate. Specifically, how does a lifetime of institutional racism and gender oppression negatively affect health outcomes for black women? This type of stress creates a feeling of dis-ease, which comes from living and working in a racialized society. When investigating why African American women have higher mortality rates related to pregnancy, this is a variable that needs to be included more often. Stress and depression often accompany diabetes, hypertension, and obesity.

## Obesity

The mother's health status before pregnancy includes her weight. Obesity is considered a major risk factor for pregnancy, since it can contribute to other health issues that cause complications. Currently, 50 percent of African American women in their childbearing years are overweight or obese. A researcher with the African American Collaborative Obesity Research Network indicates that most black women live in "obesigenic environments," meaning that neighborhoods are filled with fast food chains and do not contain parks, let alone a safe park for walking, or grocery stores that sell fresh produce. The environment that most black women live in is not conducive to supporting a healthy weight. Obesity alone carries risks related to diabetes, hypertension, and reproductive system cancers. It is suggested that obese women gain no more than 11 to 20 pounds during pregnancy. Overweight African American women are twice as susceptible to these diseases as their white counterparts. A study done in California from 2002–03 found that black women who died of maternal causes were more likely to be overweight or obese, and to have other medical risk factors. Overweight women might also have larger infants, or excessive tissue that could make a vaginal delivery more difficult and require a C-section. Some health experts have said that physicians haven't adapted their approach to childbirth to accommodate these new risks.

## Cesarean Sections

Some health advocates indicate that the rise of Cesarean sections helps explain the high rate of maternal mortality. One-third of all births are now by C-sections. Ten years ago, that figure was 20 percent; this is almost double the number of C-sections that the World Health Organization recommends for industrialized countries. An ectopic pregnancy, also called a "tubal pregnancy," is any pregnancy in which the fertilized egg implants on any tissue other than the endometrial lining of the uterus/womb. This can cause excessive bleeding or hemorrhaging and lead to death. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the leading cause of death and disability among American women. African American women are at high risk for CVD because of prevalent risk factors such as obesity and hypertension.

## High Blood Pressure

Blood pressure is the force exerted by the blood pushing against the artery walls. When the pressure in the arteries becomes too high, it's called high blood pressure, or hypertension. African American women are more likely than other women to have high blood pressure, but any woman of any race can have it. High blood pressure, often called "pressure" in the black community, is more common among black women than in the general population. In the United States, 45 percent of non-Hispanic black females age 20 and older have high blood pressure, compared with 27 percent of non-Hispanic white women. It is unclear why high blood pressure is more common in black women than in women of other racial groups in the United States. Some studies link high levels of hypertension among black women to physical inactivity and obesity. There are four types of high blood pressure that can affect pregnant

women: Chronic hypertension is the ongoing high blood pressure that is diagnosed before pregnancy or before the 20th week of pregnancy. If a woman is diagnosed with gestational hypertension (starting after 20 weeks) and her blood pressure is still high 12 weeks after delivery, the condition is considered chronic. Gestational hypertension is a form of high blood pressure that develops after 20 weeks of pregnancy and goes away after delivery. Preeclampsia is a serious disorder that occurs when a pregnant woman has high blood pressure and protein in her urine after 20 weeks of pregnancy. Untreated preeclampsia can cause serious complications to mother and baby that could become fatal. Preeclampsia affects three to eight percent of pregnant women, and it is even more common among African Americans. Chronic and gestational hypertension are risk factors for preeclampsia. Preeclampsia is also more prevalent in black women, although exactly how much more common it is in African Americans than in Caucasians is not known. In addition, the disorder is likely to be more severe and show up during the sixth month of pregnancy, while it typically develops in white women when they are seven to eight months pregnant. Medical professionals don't know why black women are more likely to develop preeclampsia, but they suspect that it's related to the higher rates of hypertension. One study found that black women had less folic acid and more of a certain amino acid and suggested that black women might benefit from taking more folic acid during pregnancy.

## Diabetes

Diabetes is a disease in which the body does not produce or properly use insulin, a hormone that converts sugar, starches, and other food into the energy needed in daily life. While there is no known cause for diabetes, genetics and other factors, such as obesity and lack of exercise, appear to play a major part. This has important implications, because 8 percent of African American women have diabetes. There are three types of diabetes: Type I—the body does not produce any insulin. African Americans with Type I must take a daily insulin injection to stay alive. The onset of Type I occurs most often during puberty. Type II—the body does not make enough, or properly use insulin. Type II is more common in African Americans and the risk increases with age. Type II is the most preventable form of diabetes when early attention is paid to weight, diet, and exercise. Gestational diabetes mellitus is a temporary form of the disease that develops during pregnancy. This condition usually goes away after pregnancy. Therefore, some women become pregnant with a history of diabetes, while others are diagnosed with gestational diabetes mellitus during pregnancy. Both create complications for the mother because she has the inability to effectively process carbohydrates, leading to increased glucose in the blood stream. Although African American women are less likely than other women to develop gestational diabetes, when they do, they are 52 percent more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes in the future. Intervention strategies include healthy diet, exercise, and weight management because obesity is the leading cause of diabetes.

## Homicide

Homicide is a risk factor in pregnancy-related death that is not often discussed, however, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that African American women are vulnerable to being murdered while pregnant. The homicide rate for pregnant black women was more than triple that for white women. Between 1991 and 1999, public health researchers investigated the deaths of women who died while pregnant or within a year of being pregnant and found 1,993 that were caused by injury, compared with 4,200 that were directly related to pregnancy complications. Of the injury-related deaths, 617, or 31 percent, were ruled homicide, making murder the second most common cause of injury-related death for

pregnant women after car accidents. Pre-pregnancy health conditions are important and controllable risk factors in pregnancy-related death. There is a call for a holistic approach to the maternal health of African American women that includes appropriate weight, proper nutrition, environmental stress reduction, and a healthy lifestyle. This approach will assist with the elimination of or provide control over chronic medical conditions like obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease.

- pregnancy
- preeclampsia
- high blood pressure
- high pressure
- blood pressure
- women in black
- diabetes

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#### See Also

- [Broken Brown Egg, The](#)
- [Infant Mortality Rate in Native Hawaiians](#)
- [Maternal Mortality](#)
- [Reproductive Health Issues](#)
- [Reproductive Health, Environmental Effects on](#)

#### Further Readings

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