

Alzheimer's disease may be more prevalent and manifests itself differently among African-Americans

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A new study by researchers at Rush University Medical Center reviews research that suggests that the risk for developing Alzheimer's disease among older African Americans may be two to three times greater than in the non-Hispanic white population and that they differ from the non-Hispanic white population in risk factors and disease manifestation. The study results will be published in the April 7 issue of *Health Affairs*.

"The older African American population is growing at a rapid pace, and the burden of aging-related cognitive impairment and Alzheimer's disease will continue to present a tremendous challenge," said Lisa Barnes, PhD. "This study highlights the importance of research among minority groups within the communities in which hospitals serve."

Barnes is the primary author and director of the Rush Center of Excellence on Disparities in HIV and Aging in the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center, and professor of Neurological Sciences and Behavioral Sciences at Rush University Medical Center.

"The lack of high-quality biologic data on large numbers of racial and ethnic minorities poses barriers to progress in understanding whether the mechanisms and processes of Alzheimer's disease operate the same or differently in racial and ethnic minorities and, if so, how, particularly in the high-risk African American population," said Barnes.

In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau indicated that 20 percent of the population ages 65 and older was a racial or [ethnic minority](#) member. Current projections suggest that by 2050, 42 percent of the nation's older adults will be members of [minority groups](#). Among those ages 85 and older, 33 percent are projected to be a minority.

"Delaying disease onset is the most critical component to reducing racial disparities in Alzheimer's disease," said Barnes. "In order to prevent the disease, we must first identify [risk factors](#) for cognitive decline and development of Alzheimer's. This would help us to create strategies to modify behavior and develop effective treatment plans."

Research suggests that there may be a combination of biologic, cultural, health systems-based and other factors that may be contributing to the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease in African Americans when compared to non-Hispanic whites. They maintain that cognitive tests done over time actually indicate small or no differences in performance among these populations and that studies on risk factors have produced useful, yet insufficient, explanations of the disparities—largely due to the lack of African American participation in research studies.

"In order to understand why Alzheimer's is more prevalent among African Americans and why it manifests itself differently, we would need more African Americans research participants in Alzheimer's disease studies and we would need to look at a range of risk factors and their effects on cognition over time," said Barnes. "This would require us to go beyond traditional cognitive function tests, and instead, include imaging, biomarkers, and autopsy studies, to aid in accurate diagnosis."

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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