

## Breast Cancer in African American Women

### Important Statistics

- While the overall breast cancer incidence rate for African American women is about 10 percent lower than for white women, the mortality rate is 37 percent higher. (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2009).
- African American women have higher rates of distant stage breast cancer than white women. (ACS, 2009).
- African American women with breast cancer in the U.S. are less likely than white women to survive five years: 77 percent vs. 90 percent respectively. (ACS, 2009).
- Breast cancer is the most common cancer among African American women. (ACS, 2009).

### Additional Background Information

The causes of higher mortality rates, more frequent late-stage diagnosis, and poorer survival rates are complex and not completely understood. Aggressive tumor characteristics linked to poorer prognosis appear to be more common in African American women and may contribute to lower survival rates. However, even when controlling for these factors, African American women have poorer survival rates. This can be explained in part by unequal receipt of prompt, high quality treatment for African American women compared to white women. (ACS, 2009).

A recent review of the literature explored the social determinants of the disparity affecting African American women. (Gerend & Pai, 2008). The authors grouped the social determinants of the breast cancer disparity into three categories - poverty, culture and social injustice.

- Poverty: A higher proportion of African Americans live in poverty than do whites. Barriers related to poverty include the lack of a primary care physician, inadequate health insurance and limited knowledge about breast cancer. (Gerend & Pai, 2008). Further, through lifelong dietary and reproductive habits, poverty may influence disease pathology and genetic markers of disease. (American Cancer Society, 2009).
- Culture: Studies show that cultural factors affect an African American woman's decision to be screened and treated for breast cancer. Barriers related to culture include low perception of risk for breast cancer, myths handed down within families and communities, and mistrust of the health care system. (Gerend & Pai, 2008).
- Social Injustice: Racial prejudice and discrimination have been shown to have negative health affects. Studies have shown that racial prejudice may result in African American women being referred for mammography less frequently. More research is needed in this area. (Gerend & Pai, 2008).

American Cancer Society. (2009). *Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans 2009-2010*. Atlanta: American Cancer Society.

Gerend, M. A., & Pai, M. (2008). Social Determinants of Black-White Disparities in Breast Cancer Mortality: A Review. *Cancer Epidemiology Biomarkers & Prevention*, 17 (11), 2913-2923.