Finding New Ways to Enroll Men in Alzheimer's Studies

Rutgers-Newark researchers and community members are testing new strategies to enroll Black men in Alzheimer's research.

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Researchers at Rutgers University–Newark and community outreach workers are exploring new ways to engage men—especially Black men—in Alzheimer's disease research, according to a university news release.

Alzheimer's is a progressive illness affecting parts of the brain that control thought, memory and language. An estimated 7.2 million Americans ages 65 and older are living with the condition, and that number continues to grow, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

Led by Mark Gluck, PhD, a professor of neuroscience and public health at Rutgers University–Newark and director of the Rutgers Aging and Brain Health Alliance, Pathways to Healthy Aging in African Americans examines the long-term role of genetics, environment and lifestyle in the development of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia among Black Americans. The study aims to better understand Alzheimer's in order to delay or stop the disease.

Many studies show that African Americans are at greater risk for Alzheimer's compared with other groups. In fact, older African Americans are about twice as likely to have Alzheimer's or another dementia compared with older white Americans of European ancestry, according to the Alzheimer's Association, yet Black men are historically underrepresented in dementia studies of the disease.

Some researchers have suggested that social determinants of health, such as limited access to health care, biases in testing and higher rates of Alzheimer's risk factors, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, are to blame for the increased risk among Black Americans.

Over the last decade, the study has successfully enrolled hundreds of women through working

with local churches and mosques, but enrolling men has proved more difficult. In fact, over the last 10 years, men have accounted for less than 20% of the 850 participants in the study.

This past year, however, enrollment of men has increased to over 35%. This jump can be attributed to the efforts of dedicated older Black men working as community brain health educators.

Rodney Bernard, 77, is one such educator helping Rutgers University–Newark recruit men for the study. He says the key to this work is not to overwhelm or talk down to potential participants about lifestyle changes they can make to reduce their dementia risk.

“Our attention span is limited, so you’ve got to have a hook to hold our interest,” Barnard said.

Bernard recommends giving men a brief primer on dementia and then moving on to a answer questions. He also believes the reason men are more likely to respond to questions in one-on-one settings compared with large groups is: “The fewer the men, the less the risk the information will get out.”

“Men’s and women’s brains are different anatomically. In addition, they experience exposure to very different reproductive hormones over their lifetime. These differences, along with other social differences between men and women, can all strongly influence the trajectory and risk factors for Alzheimer’s disease,” Gluck said. “Our goal is to better understand these sex differences so we can determine what is unique, and what is the same, about Alzheimer’s disease in men versus women.”

Alzheimer’s can begin with mild memory loss that may lead to an individual’s inability to converse and react to their environment and can interfere with his or her ability to perform routine daily tasks. To learn more, go to Real Health’s Basics on Alzheimer’s Disease.

To read more, click #Alzheimer’s Disease. There, you’ll see headlines such as “What the Air You Breathe May Be Doing to Your Brain,” “How Exercise Can Protect Against Alzheimer’s” and “How Exercise Can Protect Against Alzheimer’s.”

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