

What Women of Color Should Know About Uterine Fibroids

When it comes to uterine fibroids, for women of color, taking control of your health is one of the most important steps to getting proper care.

Maia Niguel Hoskin, PhD

By Maia Niguel Hoskin, PhD Medically Reviewed by Kara Leigh Smythe, MD

Last Updated: November 16, 2020

Uterine fibroids, or noncancerous growths in and around the uterus, are far more common than some women might think. According to the U.S Department of Health & Human Services, as many as 80 percent of women will develop uterine fibroids by age 50 — but Black women experience them at disproportionate rates to other races.

Although fibroids are noncancerous, and in many cases can be treated, Black women tend to develop them at a younger age and experience more severe symptoms and complications than white women. But there are steps that women of color can take to advocate for proper care.

Facts About Uterine Fibroids in Women of Color

A study published in December 2017 in the journal F1000Research found that by age 50, almost two-thirds of all women will develop uterine fibroids — but Black women not only are three times more likely to experience them, they also have an increased chance of having larger and multiple tumors with more severe symptoms and are more likely to develop them earlier in life compared to women of other races.

Another study published in March 2016 in the journal Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology found that almost a quarter of Black women between ages 18 and 30 have fibroids compared to roughly 6 percent of white women. These findings also showed that by age 35, 60 percent of Black women will have fibroids, compared to 40 percent of white women the same age. Black women are also two to three times more likely to experience complications or reoccurring fibroids.

According to Hilda Hutcherson, MD, assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology and associate dean for diversity and minority affairs at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City, the majority of women who have uterine fibroids are asymptomatic, and their tumors don't cause a serious health threat.

But for those who do experience symptoms, they may include things like:

- Heavy menstrual bleeding and potentially anemia
- Pelvic pain or discomfort
- Pain during sex
- Lower back pain
- Increased urinary frequency

Some women may also experience complications during pregnancy and labor — or in rare cases, infertility. “Fibroids are not often associated with infertility — in fact, many women don’t discover they have them until their first ultrasound after becoming pregnant,” says Dr. Hutcherson.

Racial Disparities in Healthcare

Although it remains unclear exactly why Black women experience uterine fibroids disproportionately to other races, according to Hutcherson, limited access to quality medical treatment might provide some insight. While there are numerous populations that experience healthcare disparities, according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, women of color are often the most affected.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the maternal mortality rate among Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native women is two to three times higher than white women. Black women are also less likely to seek medical care to assist with infertility issues. Meanwhile, according to the American Cancer Society, Black women are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer at a more advanced stage, and are more likely to die from the disease compared to white women.

Although research has found that wage inequality and lack of access to health insurance play a significant role in many of these disparities, according to the American Bar Association, racial bias among doctors is also an issue of concern in the medical community. In fact, a study published in February 2012 in the journal Pain Medicine found that Black patients were 22 percent less likely to be given pain relievers by their provider after reporting pain than white patients — and that this has been an ongoing issue among medical providers for decades when treating patients of color.

And when it comes to treating uterine fibroids, according to a study published in March 2014 in the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Black women

are almost four times more likely than white women to have a hysterectomy due to fibroids. What's more, about a third of these hysterectomies are performed between ages 18 and 44 — significant childbearing years.

The good news: These statistics have caught the attention of some medical experts who are starting to demand answers.

In the meantime, what does this all mean for women of color who are diagnosed with uterine fibroids? "The question of what to do when confronted with fibroids is a tricky one," says Hutcherson. "Fibroids are benign, so if they aren't actively affecting a woman's health or threatening her fertility, I typically recommend that my patients just leave them alone. In extreme cases, a hysterectomy can be recommended — but that should be the treatment of last resort. There are alternative treatments for severe fibroids that are less invasive and can preserve fertility."

Finding the Right Doctor Can Help

In most cases, uterine fibroids can be treated. However, it's important to find the right doctor who will help you better understand your options. That's the first step that women of color can take toward receiving quality medical care and experiencing a successful and healthy recovery.

Start your search with these tips:

Understand your insurance. Hutcherson encourages women of color to become knowledgeable about what their insurance covers and which gynecologists are available in their network.

Do your homework. “Be sure to perform your due diligence and research to identify the right gynecologist for you,” says Hutcherson. “Research questions that should be posed to care providers, and be sure to ask the questions that matter most to you.” Keep in mind that you have the right to select the provider that you feel the most comfortable with. However, if for some reason you are unable to select your provider of choice, be sure to advocate for yourself and insist that your doctor keeps you well informed of your diagnosis and treatment.

Look for a connection. Select a provider who listens to your needs, recommends Hutcherson. Findings from in-depth interviews and focus groups with Black women published in April 2017 in the journal Critical Publish Healthrevealed that Black women tend to not feel heard by their doctor, and as a result, many are reluctant to inquire about their diagnosis and treatment. But having a provider who listens to you and has your best interests at heart can make a difference in your care. If possible, consider selecting a provider who is a woman of color to increase the likelihood that they better understand your experiences.