

Breast cancer disparities exist in Black, rural communities

BY DEVIN HARRIS-CLARK

As Breast Cancer Awareness Month rolls around each October, organizations, advocates, and individuals come together to raise awareness about one of the most prevalent health issues facing women worldwide.

In the United States, breast cancer affects millions of families each year. Yet, despite advances in research, treatment, and early detection, certain communities continue to face disparities that affect outcomes and access to care—particularly Black women and those living in rural areas.

According to the American Cancer Society (ACS), in 2025, it's estimated that 1 in 8 women will be diagnosed

with breast cancer in their lifetime. This statistic is a grim reminder of the importance of early screening, education, and accessible healthcare. In fact, the ACS estimates that more than 280,000 new cases of invasive breast cancer will be diagnosed this

year alone, with an expected 43,000 deaths.

While breast cancer is a disease that touches all women, it does not affect all communities equally. Certain groups, such as Black women and those in rural areas, face unique challenges that exacerbate the already daunting realities of the disease.

Disparities in the Black Community

For Black women in the United States, the statistics paint a concerning picture. Though Black women are less likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer than white women, they are more likely to experience aggressive forms of the disease, such as triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC).

This form of breast cancer lacks three common receptors that help doctors predict how the cancer will respond to treatment, making it more difficult to treat and leading to poorer outcomes.

Barriers such as lack of health insurance, underrepresentation in clinical trials, and cultural mistrust of the medical system further contribute to the challenges faced by Black women. Early

detection—often a game changer in survival rates—can be hindered by these barriers, with many Black women not receiving mammograms or screenings at recommended intervals.

The Struggles in Rural America

Rural communities across the United States, regardless of race, face them

own set of challenges when it comes to breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. In rural areas, access to healthcare is a constant issue, with long distances to the nearest hospitals or treatment centers and a shortage of healthcare professionals in many regions.

According to a study by the National Rural Health Association (NRHA), rural residents are more

likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer at a later stage compared to their urban counterparts, leading to a 30% higher likelihood of dying from the disease. The barriers are multifaceted: economic hardships, lack of transportation, limited insurance coverage, and fewer available screening facilities all play a role in delaying care.

Breaking the Barriers

As Breast Cancer Awareness Month encourages women to "Think Pink," it's crucial to address the deep-rooted disparities that hinder the health outcomes of vulnerable communities.

In the Black community, organizations like the Black Breast Cancer Alliance and Sister Reach have worked to bridge the gap by providing

education, emotional support, and resources to help women navigate the complexities of diagnosis and treatment.

A Call to Action

It's more important than ever to remember that raising awareness isn't just about pink ribbons—it's about ensuring every woman, no matter where she lives or what her background is, can survive and thrive.

Resources:

American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
National Breast Cancer Foundation: www.nationalbreastcancer.org
Black Breast Cancer Alliance: www.blackbreastcancer.org
Sister Reach: www.sisterreach.org

October put spotlight on Breast Cancer Awareness

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October was Breast Cancer Awareness month, bringing attention to the second leading cause of cancer deaths in women.

The Alabama Cancer Statistics reports on recent cancer diagnoses, mortality, and trends in the state, broken down by cancer groupings, race, sex, and other demographic factors. Reports assist agencies and organizations in cancer prevention.

Approximately 4,000 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed in Alabama each year.

Statistically, ACS reports that a woman's average risk of developing breast cancer is one in eight.

The risk of dying from breast cancer is 25% higher in Black women compared to white women. Black females in Alabama have a significantly higher breast cancer incidence rate than white females, representing a rate of 126.8 versus 119.4.

In some cases, Black women experience higher mortality due to being diagnosed at a later stage, and the cancer could be biologically more aggressive.

ACS is involved in the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program, which provides screening, diagnostic services, and referrals to treatment. The program attempts to reduce screening disparities among low-income and uninsured women.

Some breast cancer risk factors include high breast tissue density, reproductive history, increasing age, family history, or having inherited gene mutations (e.g., BRCA).

ACS recommends screenings, such as mammography, to help detect cancers before symptoms develop. It would also be beneficial to consider genetic counseling/testing. Genetic counseling provides insight to patients and their families about family medical history and helps individuals understand conditions and risks.

According to the American Cancer Society (ACS), breast cancer forms when cells in the breast grow abnormally. Malignant cells form tumors, invading any tissue nearby. Breast cancer develops from milk ducts (ductal carcinoma) or lobules (lobular carcinoma).

Breast cancer is mostly a disease that affects women; however, men can develop it too. Breast cancer can affect 1 in every 726 men. According to the ACS, breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in women in the United States

ACS has reported that early detection and therapies have reduced mortality. Surviving breast cancer depends on various factors: the stage at detection, treatment and its quality, tumor biology, and other factors.

A common statistic about breast cancer is that when it is confined to the breast, a 5-year survival rate is often 99%. In the advanced stages or metastatic disease, the survival rate decreases, often indicating a need for ongoing monitoring and therapy. Disparities in survival are typically substandard for disadvantaged populations and racial minorities, and this could mean delaying diagnosis or access to high-quality healthcare.

BREAST CANCER AWARENESS FACTS 4,000 NEW CASES IN ALABAMA EACH YEAR.

FIRST ACCREDITED NAPBC BREAST CENTER IN ALABAMA. NATIONAL ACCREDITATION PROGRAM FOR BREAST CENTERS ACCREDITED BREAST CENTER.

1 IN 8 WOMEN in the United States are diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime.

2.9 BREAST CANCER is the *second leading* cause of CANCER DEATH IN WOMEN. MILLION BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS live in the United States.

EARLY SCREENING AND DETECTION DECREASES MORTALITY RATES AND LEADS TO A GREAT RANGE OF TREATMENT OPTIONS.

Breast Cancer Risk Factors

FAMILY HISTORY AND GENETICS

- Relatives with breast cancer or ovarian cancer at a young age
- Changes in BRCA1, BRCA2, or other genes related to breast cancer

MOTHERHOOD

- Having children after age 35 or never having children
- Not breastfeeding

HORMONES

- Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) increases your risk for breast cancer. Ask your doctor if HRT is necessary.

LIFESTYLE

- Sedentary lifestyle & inactivity
- Being overweight
- Smoking

OTHER RISK FACTORS

- Getting older
- Radiation treatment to the chest
- History of breast cancer
- Being a woman

Menstruation

- Starting your period before age 12
- Starting menopause after age 55

O'NEAL COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTER
UAB MEDICINE