African Americans continue to experience higher cancer incidence (all sites combined), higher mortality rates, and lower rates of cancer survival than other racial and ethnic groups in the United States (American Cancer Society, 2007a). Despite having a lower incidence of breast cancer compared to Caucasian women older than age 40, African American women have a higher mortality rate from the disease. Furthermore, for women younger than age 40, the incidence of breast cancer actually is higher among African Americans than Caucasians (American Cancer Society, 2007b). The same trend is evident in other cancers; the incidence and mortality rates for colorectal cancer for African Americans far exceed those of Caucasians, and the mortality rate for cervical cancer in African American women is almost double the rate of Caucasian women (National Cancer Institute, 2007). Early detection followed by effective treatment is believed to be a crucial factor in decreasing cancer mortality rates; however, the literature suggests that African Americans are less likely than others to participate in cancer screening and early detection programs (Champion et al., 2006; Champion et al., 2003; Champion & Menon, 1997; Powe, 1995; Russell, Monahan, Wagle, & Champion, 2007; Skinner, Champion, Menon, & Seshadri, 2002; Trauth et al., 2005; Weinrich, Weinrich, Atwood, Boyd, & Greene, 1998).

Statistics used to determine rates of participation in cancer screening typically are based on patients’ self-reported screening or medical records. Medical records are viewed by some as the gold standard and are the legal standard by which care is documented and evaluated. Although self-reports are a key component of patients’ health histories, their reliability and accuracy often are debated. Even so, population-based studies (e.g., Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey, National Health and Nutritional Examination Survey) have influenced policy and reported on national trends based on self-reported screening, which may be over- or underestimated by patients when compared to medical records. Over- or underestimation of screening can be even more significant for African Americans, who bear a disproportionate cancer burden.

References:


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