

N.J. helps to study breast cancer's racial divide

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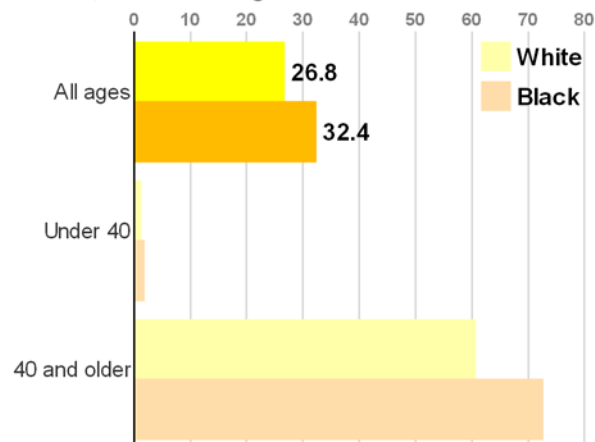
THE RECORD

Breast cancer

Black women of all ages die more often from breast cancer than white women, even though they are less likely to be diagnosed with the disease.

Mortality rate

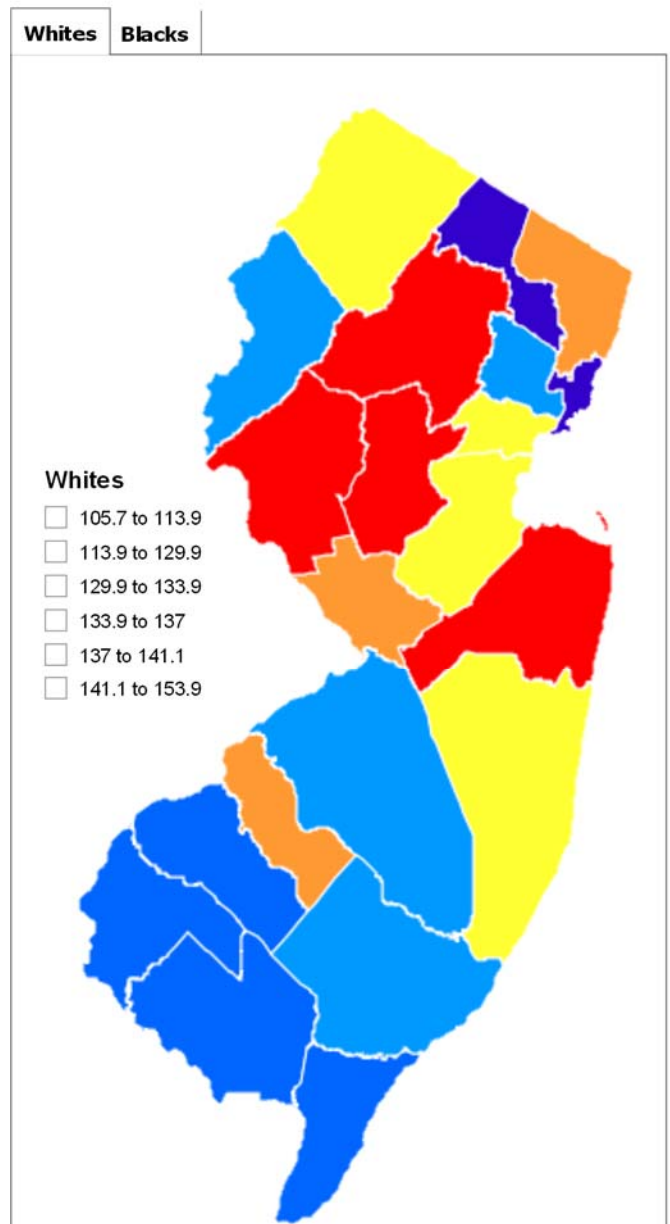
New Jersey deaths from breast cancer per 100,000 women, annual average from 2003-07:



Source: N.J. Department of Health & Senior Services
R.L. REBACH/STAFF ARTIST

Breast cancer rate

Cases per 100,000 population. Rates are age-adjusted to 2000 U.S. standard population.



Thousands of women in New Jersey are helping scientists learn more about breast cancer in African-Americans, including why it strikes young black women more aggressively and more often than white women.

They are answering a host of lifestyle questions, providing saliva samples for genetic analysis, and allowing researchers to measure their body-mass index as part of the most ambitious project to date to understand why breast cancer affects women of different races differently.

More than 2,400 New Jersey women, including more than 200 each from Bergen and [Passaic](#) counties, have joined the study already.

When New Jersey's participants are combined with those from three other studies nationally, more than 10,000 women — half of them diagnosed with cancer and half of them healthy "controls" — will have participated. The National Cancer Institute provided \$19.6 million in added funding this summer to allow four separate regional studies to pool their data, making it the largest study of its type.

"Breast cancer in African-American women occurs at an earlier age than in European-American women," according to the first paper from the Women's Circle of Health study, which began in 2003. It was co-authored by Dr. Elisa V. Bandera of the Cancer Institute of New Jersey and Karen Pawlish of the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, with 28 others.

Black women are more likely to have high-grade tumors and tumors that don't respond to hormonal therapy, the study has found. But the reasons are unknown, the 2009 report said.

Honoring her mother

Ethel Spray of [Teaneck](#) wants to help find out why. Diagnosed last year, she has fully recovered. "When I got the letter [about the study] this past May, I responded to it," she said. An interviewer visited her and asked about "the type of food you eat, what you drink," she said. "Sometimes it's something in your past, stress that could bring it on."

"If there's any type of research or study that can make a difference in anybody's life, I would like to see it done," Spray said.

Debra Marshall of Elizabeth joined the study as part of the control group last year. She is 35 and healthy, but she knows breast cancer's toll personally: Her mother was diagnosed at age 50 and died in 2006.

Her mother was an oncology nurse. In her honor, Marshall established the Yvonne McCalla Foundation "to empower women and save lives," she said, by educating them about breast cancer.

"Once I heard about the study [at the Cancer Institute], I jumped on it immediately," said Marshall, a social worker. She has recruited almost 40 women to join it.

Exploring diet risks



DAVID BERGELAND/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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Alexis Johnson and Joanne English Rollieson of Gilda's Club of Northern New Jersey focus on the needs of black women, who often face more aggressive forms of breast cancer.

Department of Health and Senior Services, with

To take part

Participants are needed for the Women's Circle of Health study. African-American women who live in Bergen, Hudson, Essex, Passaic, Union, Mercer, Monmouth and Burlington counties are invited. They must either have had a breast-cancer diagnosis within the previous nine months or, if without cancer,

To find cancer patients for the study, the state health department culls the New Jersey State Cancer Registry, to which all new diagnoses are reported by doctors, hospitals and laboratories. State health department staff call them and explain the study, said Pawlish, a state researcher. Those who agree to join are interviewed at their homes by Cancer Institute staff for about two hours.

meet certain other criteria. No medications or blood work are involved; a researcher will interview you. All information is kept confidential. For information, call 732-235-8806.

This fall, Bandera, the principal investigator in New Jersey, will start evaluating the role of diet and obesity on breast cancer in African-Americans.

Earlier studies established a link between obesity and breast cancer in post-menopausal women, but they focused primarily on white women, she said. "The impact of obesity on breast cancer risk among African-American women is not well-known," she said.

The findings so far are provocative: Among women with breast cancer, 52 percent of African-Americans in the study were obese, compared with 26 percent of whites.

The study will also be able to look at rare types of breast cancer "that are more common in African-Americans," Bandera said, including triple-negative breast cancer and inflammatory breast cancer.

The large pool of data formed by combining the Women's Circle of Health Study in New Jersey and New York with three other studies nationally means scientists will have enough women with these rarer subtypes to make valid conclusions about their relationship to various risk factors and genes.

About 1,000 more African-American women in New Jersey are needed as participants over the next four years, Bandera said.

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