



# WCHS NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2016



## Women's Circle of Health Follow-Up Study: Update

-By Elisa V. Bandera, MD, PhD

### Celebrating 10 years!

Hard to believe that it has been 10 years since we started the study in New Jersey. 2015 was a good year for the study. We were able to obtain more funding from the National Cancer Institute to continue recruiting women and to conduct more home follow-up visits to update your information. It is well known that African American women experience worse survival than other racial/ethnic groups and we are committed to study the causes of this disparity so that we can eliminate it. Since we started recruiting for the Women's Circle of Health Follow-up Study almost 400 women have already participated, and many of you have done the first initial visit, and two follow-up visits, which

happen approximately at 2 years and 3 years after diagnosis.

**We are so grateful to all of you for your time, and for saying "yes, I want to help" when we call you.** Together we hope to find answers that may help women make the best lifestyle choices to improve their quality of life and to reduce the chances of the cancer coming back, as well as provide information to doctors for the best way of treating African American breast cancer survivors who suffer from other diseases such as diabetes or hypertension.

We appreciate all your time and hope that you will continue to say yes. In this newsletter, we wanted to introduce you our team of interviewers and two new investigators who were carefully chosen for their clinical and research expertise as well as their commitment to breast cancer. We would also like to honor all of our participants. **Your stories are our inspiration.**

We hope to be in touch in the years to come. If you have any comments or suggestions, please email us at [wchstudy@cinj.rutgers.edu](mailto:wchstudy@cinj.rutgers.edu)

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*Drs. Kitaw Demissie, Elisa Bandera, and Chi-Chen Hong (Principal Investigators for the Women's Circle of Health Follow-Up Study) working on study files.*

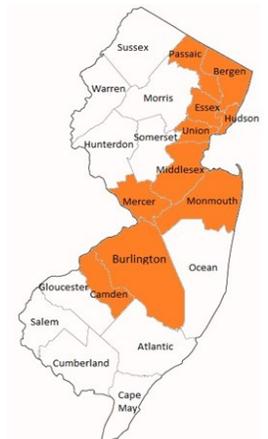


## Why your participation is important

Our participants in the **Women's Circle of Health Follow-Up Study** are all African American breast cancer survivors from 10 counties in New Jersey. (highlighted in orange).

We know when we call you, you are juggling so much in your life. We will work with you to find a time that is convenient for you. It is very important that we interview many women and that your information is complete so that we can make solid conclusions about the data as a group.

Since we want to know your experiences over time beginning from your diagnosis, it is important that we collect information from all women in the same time windows (e.g. 2 years after diagnosis). That's why it is important that we schedule your home visit close to the time frame when we first contacted you. Please feel free to call us or email us if you have any questions about the study.



We are so lucky to have an excellent and passionate team of interviewers who drive around New Jersey to visit our many participants, sacrificing many of their weekends for our study.

## Meet our interviewers



**Simone Francis, MPH**

Simone is an experienced phlebotomist. She just completed a Master's in Public Health at the University of New England.



**Nakia McCall**

Nakia has over ten years experience in clinic settings. In addition to her passion for breast cancer, she is a writer and an actress!



**Hiral Shukla**

Hiral is also a certified phlebotomist with experience in research studies.



## Dr. Brian Gonzalez

We are so excited that Dr. Gonzalez joined the study team last year! He is a behavioral oncologist and an expert in sleep disorders. This is what he has to say:

*"Sleep is very important, especially for breast cancer survivors. Many women have sleep problems during and after cancer treatment. You may notice we will ask some questions about your sleep at your next home visit. We're trying to learn how to avoid sleep problems in future survivors. We are also trying to find*

*the best way to treat survivors who already have sleep problems. These discoveries are only possible because of the many survivors like you who have volunteered for this study. We know you are very busy, and we are very grateful you share some of your time with us."*



## Dr. Adana Llanos

We are very lucky to have Dr. Adana Llanos on our team. She is a molecular epidemiologist with expertise in cancer disparities, and is an Assistant Professor at Rutgers School of Public Health.

*"We know that breast cancer in black women tends to develop at earlier ages and with more aggressive features than breast cancer in white women. But the reasons for these observations are not well understood. As a member of a 'high-risk' breast cancer family myself, I am devoted to under-*

*standing the causes of worse disease outcomes in black women and ways to reduce them. I love the work we are doing in the Women's Circle of Health Study and I am thankful to all of our wonderful study participants for the important contributions to this study."*

# Did you know?

-By Adana Llanos, PhD, MPH



Did you know that it is quite common for a woman to self-detect her breast cancer? Among WCHS participants, close to 45% of women reported that either she or her partner first noticed the painless lump that was later diagnosed

through mammography as breast cancer. This fact highlights the importance of being aware of our bodies so that we notice when something is not quite right. This is true for women without breast cancer, but equally important among breast cancer survivors. Even after breast cancer treatment it is important to continue visiting your oncologist and/or primary care provider and keeping up to date with your breast cancer screening ac-

tivities so that you are aware of signs of potential cancer recurrence. It is recommended that breast cancer survivors visit their doctor every 3-6 months for the first 3 years after treatment, every 6-12 months for the next 2 years and then once per year after that. It is also recommended that you schedule a mammogram 1 year after the first mammogram that led to your breast cancer diagnosis. But if you had radiation treatment, you should wait 6

months after your last treatment. After the first mammogram following your treatment, a mammogram is recommended at least every year. It is also recommended that you perform a monthly breast self-exam, but remember self-exams are not a substitute for a mammogram. Always take good care of yourself!

## Eat more fresh fruit and veggies

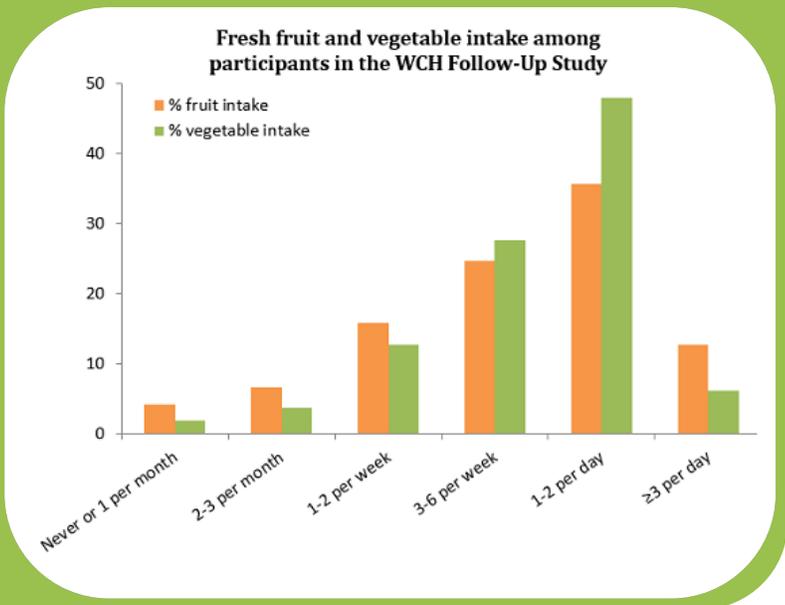
Research shows that there are many benefits to eating well, including possibly reducing the risk of cancer recurrence. There is fairly strong evidence that a plant-based diet can reduce the risk of cancer overall and that people who eat diets that are rich in fresh fruits and vegetables and sparse in meat and animal fat, have lower rates of some cancers, and other chronic diseases. During breast cancer treatment, some women lose weight due to side effects from chemotherapy and radiation (such as nausea, taste changes and loss of appetite) and sometimes the treatment itself impairs the body's ability to absorb nutrients. Other women gain weight during treatment as a result of the medications they are taking, reduced physical activity, or emotion-

al and stress-related eating. Whether you want to gain, lose, or simply maintain a healthy weight, experts recommend that cancer survivors eat a minimum of 5 servings of fresh fruits and veggies daily. One serving can be a cup of dark leafy greens or berries, a medium fruit, or a half cup of other colorful choices. Also use plant-based seasonings like parsley and turmeric, too.

As shown in the graph, data from our study suggests that less than 13% of participants of the WCH Follow-Up Study are consuming at least 3 servings of fresh fruit per day and only about 6% are consuming at least 3 servings of vegetables per day. Fruits and veggies are low in calories, which can help us get to and stay at a healthy weight. Let's eat more fresh fruit and veggies!

### Here are a few tips for healthier eating:

- ◊ Eat a variety of colorful fruits and veggies.
- ◊ Use a 10-inch (or smaller) plate to control portion sizes.
- ◊ Fill 2/3 of your plate with plant foods and 1/3 or less with lean protein (chicken and fish are excellent choices).
- ◊ Drink more water and avoid drinking sodas (including diet soda) because they are high in sugar
- ◊ Avoid fried foods (instead sauté your food with a sprinkle of olive oil) and avoid heavy sauces and dressings (including ranch and blue cheese).





## About the Women's Circle of Health Follow-Up

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- ⇒ Funded by the National Cancer Institute
- ⇒ Collaboration of Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Rutgers School of Public Health, and the New Jersey Cancer Registry.
- ⇒ Our aim is to understand breast cancer in African American women, in particular how obesity and related diseases such as diabetes and hypertension and their treatments, affect survival and quality of life after a breast cancer diagnosis.

Participants get \$50 per visit when they complete all parts of the study. In addition, **all women being interviewed this year will enter a raffle for \$100 the first week in January 2017.**

**Congratulations to our five winners in 2016! To protect your privacy we are not releasing your names.**

**Good luck to all in the next raffle!**

## FYI: Why taking your medication is important

-By Chi-Chen Hong, PhD

Completing your breast cancer treatment such as chemotherapy and radiation, can be difficult, and sometimes you are recommended to take hormone therapies for a long period of time after your initial treatment. Even though it may be hard, it is important to follow your treatment plan. Chemotherapy and radiation are most effective when you finish the entire course planned, and to get the most benefit out of hormone therapy (tamoxifen and/or aromatase inhibitors) you need to take the full course of treatment. Women who complete their full course of chemotherapy, radiation, and hormone treatments have the best survival rates.

Other medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes, are known to affect the physical and emotional health in breast cancer survivors.

Sometimes making sure that you take care of your other health problems can get overlooked when you are being treated for breast cancer, so it is important to make sure that you con-

tinue to see your family doctor to receive treatment for your other medical conditions and to continue receiving regular medical checkups. Making sure you take your medications correctly will also reduce the chance that you miss out on potential health benefits, and run into serious health complications. It gives you your best opportunity to maintain the best possible health for yourself and may even have beneficial effects on your breast cancer. This is an important research question we are actively working on in the Women Circle of Health Follow-up Study.

If you have trouble remembering to take your hormone therapy or medications for any other medical conditions that you have, consider using a daily pillbox or setting an alarm on your phone for a daily reminder.

Your doctor or pharmacist can also provide you with information on how

to manage your medications and health, and are also there to help you get the care you need if you do not have health care insurance or can't afford your medications. It is very important to let your doctor or pharmacist know your financial concerns if they are an issue since there are many prescription assistance programs available in New Jersey and nationwide to help with costs, and many pharmaceutical companies have their own drug assistance programs.

Circle of Joy' ©2013, Keith Mallet, used with permission of the artist

