

Efforts to Improve Lower Body Function May Lengthen Lives of Inner-City African Americans

Older African Americans who live in poor, inner-city communities are more likely to have disabilities, research has found. They also run a higher risk of further disability and death than older whites and other older African Americans.

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To learn more about how these disabilities and other factors affect how long older African Americans in poor inner cities live, researchers recently studied more than 600 African-American older adults in St. Louis, Missouri.

Between 1992 and 1994, the researchers interviewed the adults, who were 68- to 102-years-old at the time. The researchers asked them numerous questions about their health. About 10 years later, the researchers checked to see how many of the adults were still living, and whether certain health problems and other factors seemed to boost risks of death among the adults.

During the 10-year study period, about 62% of the adults died. That “mortality rate” or death rate was nearly 4% higher than the rate for older whites and other older African American residents of Missouri, the researchers report.

Certain adults in the study were more likely to die during the 10-year period, the researchers found. Those who were men, were older, had incomes of less than \$10,000 a year; had cancer, strokes or “mini strokes,” saw a doctor often, or had problems walking or using their lower bodies in other ways, were more likely to die during the study, they report.

Problems with lower body function seemed to be particularly important for three reasons, the researchers note. First, these problems were more common among the city-dwelling older African Americans in the study than in older whites and other older African Americans. Second, some research suggests that good lower body function can help prevent falls, help older adults stay independent, and lower risks of death. Finally, there are “interventions” or programs that can help older people improve their lower body function.

Existing health programs aim, among other things, to lower risks of strokes and cancer among older African Americans and other older people. In light of this new research, programs to improve lower body functioning among older African Americans may also help extend their lives, the researchers conclude. Future studies should try to determine the best ways to improve lower body functioning among these adults.

What Should I Do?

If you, a family member, or friend have weakened lower body function, you may benefit for strengthening activities.

For more information about physical activity for older adults, including physical activity that can help prevent loss of function, visit http://www.healthinaging.org/agingintheknow/chapters_ch_trial.asp?ch=11.

For more information about difficulty walking, including information about improving walking ability, visit http://www.healthinaging.org/agingintheknow/chapters_ch_trial.asp?ch=22.

The summary above is from the full report titled, “Mortality Risk in Older Inner-City African Americans.” (link to: <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1532-5415.2007.01204.x>) It is in the July 2007 issue of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (Volume 55, Issue 7). The report is authored by Theodore K. Malmstrom, PhD, Elena M. Andresen, PhD, Fredric D. Wolinsky, PhD, J. Philip Miller, AB, Kathryn Stamps, MPH, and Douglas K. Miller, MD.