



LIFTING SPIRITS AND “HEALING” HYPERTENSION IN BLACK CHURCHES

HEALTHY EATING AND LIVING SPIRITUALLY (HEALS)

Million Hearts in Action

[Strategies for Achieving Million Hearts Goals]



The prevalence of high blood pressure in African Americans in the United States is among the highest in the world.¹ Also known as hypertension, high blood pressure increases a person’s risk for heart disease and stroke. HEALS, or Healthy Eating And Living Spiritually, is a faith-based community program that aims to control and prevent hypertension among African Americans. The program collaborated with the pastors and other leaders of black churches, along with local health officials, to help teach parishioners about the tremendous impact a nutritious diet and lifestyle modifications can have on controlling high blood pressure.

[Fast Facts]

- “Compared with whites, blacks develop HBP earlier in life, and their average BP is much higher”²
- High blood pressure, along with obesity and diabetes, are the most common conditions that increase the risk of heart disease and stroke.³
- Adopting more physical activity and healthier eating habits, like those suggested in the DASH diet, can help reduce blood pressure. DASH stands for “Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension” and emphasizes fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy items, while encouraging a reduction in sodium and saturated fats.⁴



The key players have been the pastors. When the congregation sees their role model, their own church pastor, joining the program and getting involved in the program, that is a great incentive for them to adhere to the program.”

– Sunita Dodani, HEALS principal investigator

[What We Did]

- The HEALS program was centered in two African American churches in Jacksonville, Florida. It worked with church pastors to incorporate related health themes into their Sunday sermons. The program also trained other church leaders to become “health advisors” who helped provide guidance and support to participants, and measured their progress in curbing hypertension or preventing it altogether.
- HEALS began with weekly educational sessions during the first three months, followed by six months of less-frequent maintenance sessions.

¹<http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/circulationaha/early/2015/12/16/CIR.0000000000000350.full.pdf>

²<http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/circulationaha/early/2015/12/16/CIR.0000000000000350.full.pdf>

³http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/More/MyHeartandStrokeNews/African-Americans-and-Heart-Disease-Stroke_UCM_444863_Article.jsp#.V9BJSj4YhhA

⁴http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/HighBloodPressure/PreventionTreatmentofHighBloodPressure/Managing-Blood-Pressure-with-a-Heart-Healthy-Diet_UCM_301879_Article.jsp#.V9BS8z4YhhA

- The program:
 - Adopted a modified DASH diet to incorporate the ingredients often used to make soul food and other traditionally southern dishes popular among African Americans.
 - Provided cooking demonstrations at HEALS sessions that showed alternative methods for making favorite foods but with lower saturated fat and sodium levels.
 - Encouraged fewer trips to fast-food restaurants, while educating participants about how to make wiser, more nutritious choices when they do eat out.
 - Partnered with the local YMCA, which came to the churches every week to provide one-hour physical activity sessions.

[What We Accomplished]

- Participants significantly reduced their blood pressure by the end of the first three months: Systolic blood pressure dropped by an average of 12 mm HG and diastolic blood pressure by an average of 6.5mm HG.
- The program boasted extraordinarily high retention rates: 92 percent of the participants remained after three months, 73 percent were left at the end of the ninth and final month.
- HEALS partnered with the local health department to provide nutritionists who helped tailor the DASH diet to accommodate the tastes of the African American community.
- The health department also worked with local farmers to bring fresh produce trucks to the churches, which were located in “food deserts,” or areas that lack reasonable access to grocery stores. Every Sunday, the mobile farmer’s markets sold affordable fruits and vegetables to the entire congregation, not just HEALS program participants.

[What We Learned]

Getting the commitment of trusted voices is critical: Church pastors played a crucial role by endorsing HEALS and encouraging people to get involved and stay motivated to stick with the program. They mentioned the program during their weekly sermons and selected scriptures that made references to health and fitness. They also led prayers for participants to make healthy behavioral choices, and used church newsletters, bulletins and other resources to highlight the program and its benefits.

[What We Are Doing Now]

The HEALS program has been conducted in two Jacksonville churches. Program organizers have applied for funding from the National Institute of Health to test the program in 36 other churches within the Duvall County area. If granted, that phase would also emphasize obesity prevention.



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