

# Understanding Obesity Among African American Women

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## Background

- Nearly fifty percent of African American women are obese.
- Obesity is associated with some cancers.
- A national study recently found obesity rates for African American women in all income categories have increased in the last three decades, with the largest increase in obesity prevalence among the middle income tertile.
- Research tends to focus on low-socioeconomic status as a risk factor for obesity; however, African American women in all income groups should be included in obesity prevention studies.
- Efforts to try and understand differences in obesity prevalence among African American women by socioeconomic status need to explore other factors related to socio-cultural and socio-environmental context.

## Objectives

1. To investigate attitudes and perceptions regarding obesity among African American women.
2. To conduct a qualitative investigation regarding the socio-environmental, and socio-cultural context as determinants of obesity among African American women.
3. To investigate African American women's knowledge of obesity as a risk factor for some cancers.

## Methods

### Recruitment

- Participants were recruited from alumnae chapters of historically African American sororities based in Seattle, WA. Nearly 50 women responded as interested in participation after initial approach to sororities.
- Eligibility Criteria:
  - Self-identify as African American woman;
  - At least 18 years old;
  - Speak and understand English; and
  - Give informed consent.

## Methods

### Data Collection

- Data was collected using face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews.
- The following areas were investigated:
  - Food as a coping mechanism
  - Body Image
  - Cultural Perceptions of Obesity
  - Perceptions of Neighborhood
  - Exercise
  - Eating
  - Knowledge of Obesity as a Risk Factor for Some Cancers

### Sample

- Subjects were 9 pilot interview participants selected from the initial list of 50 interested women.
- BMI range = 20.4 – 38.1
- Age range = 23-65 years
- Income range = under \$15K - \$80K

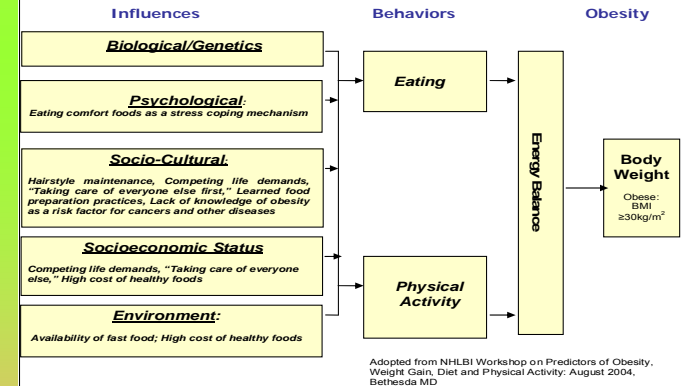
### Analysis

- Preliminary coding scheme developed from pilot interviews.
- Interview guide refined based on analysis of pilot interviews.
- Atlas.ti software will be used to:
  - organize data
  - identify common themes
  - develop a theoretical framework for understanding socio-cultural and socio-environmental influences on obesity among African American women.

## Results

- No participants have suggested new areas for investigation for our future interviews with African American women about weight.
- Some important themes have emerged:
  - Only one of six participants mentioned some cancers as being more likely among those who are obese;
  - Several reported maintaining hairstyles, and competing life demands as reasons exercise is postponed or avoided; and
  - Several women mentioned stress and competing life demands as reasons they make unhealthy food choices.
- A preliminary theoretical framework has been developed based on responses thus far (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Overarching Conceptual Model for Understanding Determinants of Obesity**



## Discussion and Future Directions

- Further analysis of our data may lead to development of a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding factors contributing to the obesity epidemic among African American women.
- Our findings could direct future qualitative and quantitative research that may be conducted to inform policies and interventions for obesity prevention in this population, among women across socioeconomic strata.
- Ultimately, such obesity prevention initiatives may help to reduce the burden of obesity experienced by African American women, and in turn, reduce the prevalence of cancers for which obesity is a risk factor among this community.