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Beliefs About Racism and Health Among African American Women With Diabetes: A Qualitative Study

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Exposure to racism has been linked to poor health outcomes. Little is known about the impact of racism on diabetes outcomes. This study explored African American women's beliefs about how racism interacts with their diabetes self-management and control. Four focus groups were conducted with a convenience sample of 28 adult African American women with type 2 diabetes who were recruited from a larger quantitative study on racism and diabetes. The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by the authors. Women reported that exposure to racism was a common phenomenon, and their beliefs did in fact link racism to poor health. Specifically, women reported that exposure to racism caused physiological arousal including cardiovascular and metabolic perturbations. There was consensus that physiological arousal was generally detrimental to health. Women also described limited, and in some cases maladaptive, strategies to cope with racist events, including eating unhealthy food choices and portions. There was consensus that the subjective nature of perceiving racism and accompanying social prohibitions often made it impossible to address racism directly. Many women described anger in such situations and the tendency to internalize anger and other negative emotions, only to find that the negative emotions would be reactivated repeatedly with exposure to novel racial stressors, even long after the original racist event remitted. African American women in this study believed that racism affects their diabetes self-management and control. Health beliefs can exert powerful effects on health behaviors and may provide an opportunity for health promotion interventions in diabetes.

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Keywords

racism; diabetes; women's health; African Americans; knowledge; attitudes; beliefs

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