

A close-up photograph of a woman's midsection. She is wearing a white, ribbed tank top and is hugging her pregnant belly with both arms. Her hands are clasped together at the bottom of her belly. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

THE FEELINGS BEHIND OUR FIBROIDS

African-American women are three times more likely to develop uterine fibroids than White women. See how stress might be manifesting as abnormal growths in our bodies

BY GINA ROBERTS-GREY

HEALTHY & HAPPY

We know you know that African-American women have some of the highest rates of fibroids, noncancerous growths of the uterus. This chronic ailment, which has no official cause, may bring on pain and heavy menstrual cycles, impact fertility and be aggravated by stress. How does stress play a role in our diagnosis?

HOW FIBROIDS BEGIN

Stress and trauma, which Black women experience far too often, can show up in our bodies in many forms, including possibly fibroids. "They are manifestations of the stagnation of various body substances," shares De'Nicea Hilton, a holistic life coach and doctor of oriental medicine at Hilton Holistic Health in Temple Terrace, Florida. It's easy to connect the dots between emotions and fibroids, she points out. Elevated stress levels and emotional trauma can cause the energy, or "Qi" (pronounced chee), that runs from the liver through your genitals and lower abdomen to stall. Not releasing emotions, anxiety and stress can also negatively impact your body's energy levels. "When Qi becomes stuck, blood along the liver channel tends to do the very same thing," says Hilton. Thus, stress and unexpressed hurt can transfer from our spirits to our bodies.

THE FIBROID FLARE-UP

Unhealed pain or uncontrolled tension may feed fibroids and cause them to grow. Diagnosed with the condition in 1996, Felicia Clark, 47, coexisted relatively peacefully with her abdominal growths for many years. In 2008 the Denver-based body image coach went through challenges that likely may have triggered a dramatic change in her symptoms. "I took a significant pay cut during the banking crisis, which led to my house going into foreclosure," she says. The turn of events, along with her getting into

two car accidents within a span of a few months, left Clark reeling and suffering from unusual abdominal pain and heavy menstrual bleeding. "An ultrasound revealed that my fibroids had increased in size."

The increase in Clark's physical problems following such strain seems to be a common occurrence in Black women. "I often work with women who say their fibroid symptoms ebb and flow with

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—OCTAVIA CANNON, D.O.

stress or overly emotional times," explains Hilton. Your body's chemical reaction to emotionally charged situations may be responsible for this. "Your brain tells the ovaries the type and amount of hormones to produce and release," says osteopathic physician Octavia Cannon, an ob-gyn and the co-owner of Arboretum Obstetrics and Gynecology in Charlotte, North Carolina. When you're stressed, your brain may send the ovaries signals that throw off the balance of hormones in the uterus, creating the optimal environment for fibroids to develop. Stress-induced high blood pressure from emotional trauma could/may be another trigger of fibroids, according to multiple studies.

Turning to food for comfort could also fuel growth, Cannon adds.

"Eating your feelings can aggravate symptoms if you choose foods that may influence your fibroids," she says. Caffeine, ham, alcohol and red meat have been associated with fibroid growth.

Helen A. Stephens, 45, saw a spike in her fibroid symptoms when she consumed red meat. "I became a vegetarian for six months and noticed a big reduction of symptoms like painful intercourse, bloating and back pain," says the founder of Diversity Fertility Services and Oshun Fertility in Short Hills, New Jersey. "I couldn't keep that diet up, because I like a good steak. But now I eat much less of it, especially when I'm stressed."

THE ANXIETY CYCLE

While stress may bring on fibroids, managing them can be its own source of anguish. Coping with pain, bloating, heavy periods and uncomfortable intercourse while navigating your romantic and social life can be draining and can create a vicious swirl of emotions. "Stress may worsen fibroids and then fibroids can cause stress. You can get stuck in a cycle that's very difficult," Cannon says.

Following her own battle with the ailment, Tanika Gray Valbrun, 38, founded the nonprofit The White Dress Project to provide fibroid awareness >



and empowerment. "I developed an intense anxiety about messing up car seats and mattresses or standing up in a business meeting and feeling the telltale gush. That meant I'd need to run to the bathroom and take an early lunch break to hit the drugstore to buy a new pair of underwear," she says.

A self-proclaimed fashionista, Valbrun says her closet was devoid of anything white: "I had plenty of sanitary pads and extra pairs of leggings in my car for the frequent emergencies. I never wore white, which was an emotional reminder of how fibroids controlled my quality of life."

Stereotypes, assumptions and judgments can also burden women who have fibroids. "You're characterized as so many things you're not," says Valbrun. "It's emotionally draining when no amount of exercise will bring your belly down. Or when people ask you about your baby's due date and you're not pregnant, but want desperately to carry and deliver a child. That created all sorts of self-esteem issues I internalized."

RECLAIMING CONTROL

"Getting your emotions in check and managing stress are paramount in handling any medical issue, particularly those concerning the female reproductive system," Cannon says.

Conventional treatments like birth control pills (to control bleeding), over-the-counter pain relievers and surgery (to remove fibroids) can treat physical symptoms. But these remedies won't heal the nonphysical issues at the heart of fibroids.

Black women are often raised in a culture that overemphasizes self-sacrifice. Early in childhood we're taught not to discuss health, abuse or anything negative.



"Releasing memories associated with any trauma is a welcome opportunity to allow energy to flow more freely," says Hilton. "Not doing so keeps us stuck in a stagnant place ripe for fibroids." She also suggests ending the cycle of self-sacrifice with introspection. "Look deep into what you're suppressing or experiences you're holding on to that weigh down your spirit."

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—DE'NICEA HILTON, D.O.M.

Next allow yourself room to identify why you feel the way you do about a situation or a memory, and to process those feelings instead of telling yourself you need to forget about them or push them to the back of your mind.

Stepping out of the shadows and talking about your health can also help. "Having a community of women going through the same thing as I am keeps me afloat and helps me manage the

emotional pain associated with fibroids," says Valbrun. The Atlanta resident had started The White Dress Project to take back power—and the ability to wear white. The organization's Facebook page has a following of more than 2,000 women navigating life with fibroids. "I was raised in an environment where a woman never talks about the complications of her period," she continues. "You're not supposed to even wash your clothes with your husband's if you have your period." But sharing her anguish brought her out of isolation. "It's emotionally freeing to know you're not alone or the only one worried about staining the mattress."

A technology-free zone helps Stephens cope with the fibroids she's faced off with for 12 years. Creating a space

where she—or her husband and two children—can relax lessens the severity of her fibroid-related symptoms. Her family has a house rule of no typing, buzzing or pinging in that room. She uses this designated area to clear her mind with breathing exercises, yoga and meditation. "If I don't have time to meditate or de-stress, I have increased lower back pain, which has always been a symptom of my fibroids," she says.

Acknowledging and relieving stress in healthy ways are critical to our livelihoods. Continue to shower yourself with love and let go of negative thoughts. Your body is listening.

Tanika Gray Valbrun stands confidently in white.

