

Teaching breast health early to reduce breast cancer mortality in D.C.

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Early breast health education may be the key to lowering breast cancer mortality rates in Washington, D.C., which has the highest rates in the country, according to research presented at the American Association for Cancer Research's Seventh Annual International Conference on Frontiers in Cancer Prevention Research.

Project Early Awareness, a breast cancer education program of Howard University Cancer Center, brings a young survivor into high school classrooms to dispel breast cancer myths, provide breast cancer facts, and teach breast self exams. While only about five percent of breast cancer cases occur in women under the age of 40, learning to understand breast cancer at a young age may lead to early diagnosis later in life.

"We want young women to know and understand their bodies," said Kimberly Higginbotham, the program's instructor and a young breast cancer survivor. "The goal is for breast self exams to become routine."

The program, which started with three schools and has extended to 17, has instructed more than 2,800 girls and their families. Each student is given a pre-test and post-test to gauge the effectiveness of the program. Howard University has seen students increase their comfort and ability to perform a breast self exam by 39 percent and their ability to answer breast cancer questions correctly increase by 69 percent.

"We always see improvement between the pre-test and the post-test," said Higginbotham. "For example, a common myth about breast cancer

is that it can be caused by getting hit in the breast. Students almost always put that it's true in the pre-test, but mark that it's false in the post-test."

Breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death in women. The mortality rates are well above average for African-American women living in the District of Columbia. Project Early Awareness aims to focus on long-term solutions to help reduce health disparities, by ensuring women are aware of the screening tools available to them as they age.

Howard University Cancer Center has received requests to extend their program to other states. As a part of the session, they provide students with information to take home to their families to help increase the reach of the program.

Source: American Association for Cancer Research

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