African American women with ovarian cancer—can obesity mask early symptoms?

28 April 2016

Erondu, MD and coauthors from Duke University School of Medicine and Duke University Medical Center (Durham, NC), Medical University of South Carolina (Charleston, SC), Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey (New Brunswick), Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine (Cleveland, OH), Baylor College of Medicine (Houston, TX), Wayne State University School of Medicine (Detroit, MI), University of Alabama at Birmingham, Louisiana State University School of Public Health (New Orleans), University of Virginia (Charlottesville), and University of Tennessee-Knoxville in the article entitled "The Association between Body Mass Index and Presenting Symptoms in African American Women with Ovarian Cancer."

No effective screening method exists for ovarian cancer, and most cases are detected after a woman experiences one or more symptoms, usually pelvic or abdominal discomfort, irregular bowel function, or bloating. In this study, about 60% of the women were obese (BMI >30) and 94% reported at least one symptom during the year prior to diagnosis. Women with the highest BMI scores experienced most symptoms more frequently and for longer duration than did women with lower scores.

"This important finding could impact the existing racial disparity in death associated with ovarian cancer by making physicians aware of the need to be especially vigilant for symptoms in obese women that might otherwise go undetected," says Susan G. Kornstein, MD, Editor-in-Chief of Journal of Women's Health, Executive Director of the Virginia Commonwealth University Institute for Women's Health, Richmond, VA, and President of the Academy of Women's Health.
