

Neglecting men's health costly to all

Yanyi K. Djamba

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June is Men's Health Month. This special awareness period about men's health was initiated by the U.S. Congress and signed into law by President Bill Clinton on May 31, 1994. Since then, Men's Health Month has been celebrated across the United States with screenings, health fairs, media coverage, and health education. Yet, despite greater public awareness of men's health issues, men's health has not improved as much as women's. Here are some facts and suggestions for improvement:

According to a 2011 report by the Men's Health Network, "there is a silent crisis in America and in Alabama, a crisis of epic proportions." The report confirms one of the key demographic facts: men live shorter and less-healthy lives than women. In Alabama, women live on average about six years longer than men (life expectancy of 78.5 versus 72.7 years in 2009), which is a wider gap than the five-year difference observed for the United States in the same year (80.9 versus 76.0 years).

This higher male mortality is also observed across races and nations. The 2009 data from the Alabama Department of Public Health show that white females outlive white males by more than five years (life expectancy of 78.9 versus 73.6 respectively for women and men). This difference is more striking among blacks. In Alabama, black females have a life expectancy of 76.6 years compared to 68.8 for black males.

Under normal conditions worldwide, women live longer than men. This gender difference has both biological and behavioral origins. Without embarking into a heated biological argument, let's look at what men do or don't do that reduce their lifespan and compromises their health.

A 2011 national study of health care access and utilization among young American adults aged 19-25 years conducted by a team of scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed that men are less likely to see a health professional than women. Fewer men reported having a usual place for health care (62.5% of men versus 77.9% of women) and having visited a doctor in the past 12 months (58.5% of men versus 81.3% of women).

Men's limited use of health care services is a key factor in their higher mortality and poor health. For example, although the heart disease is the leading cause of death for both genders in Alabama, the rate of death caused by heart disease is higher among males than females. Many of these deaths could have been prevented with routine health care screenings. Males also die at higher rates from avoidable causes. According to the 2008 data from the Alabama Department of Public Health, accidents were the third leading cause of death for white and black males, whereas it ranked sixth and eighth for white females and black females. The "black" category includes all other racial minorities.

Despite these facts, the subject of men's health is frequently neglected in both public and private discourses about health care system. How much is spent on men's health at

the state and local levels? It is important to take a full inventory of services and resources currently allocated to men's health and determine the best strategy for improving services.

Neglecting men's health is costly to families, communities, states and our nation. There are many ways that we can improve men's health in Alabama. The most important step is for men to take action. Families can help too; encourage your fathers, uncles, brothers, sons, husbands, and all male friends to take their health seriously. Many diseases are preventable and curable diseases. Even chronic and incurable diseases can be managed to prolong life.

Yanyi K. Djamba is director of the Center for Demographic Research and professor of sociology at Auburn Montgomery. The center's web site is www.demographics.aum.edu.