

‘Continual stress of racism wears down the bodies of minority populations’: Why women of color experience diabetes and heart disease at early ages

Growing up as a multiracial person in the United States, Alexis Reeves was no stranger to the impact of racial discrimination. She spent summer vacations with her father’s family in Pennsylvania, where her Black grandfather had worked as a sharecropper. Nearly everyone on that side of her family had high blood pressure, took cholesterol medication, or had experienced some form of heart disease.

The reason, Reeves later discovered, was a phenomenon called “weathering.” Just as water dripping on stone erodes rock over time, researchers have found the continual stress of [racial discrimination wears down the bodies of minority populations](#).

Weathering doesn’t just hurt people—it hurts the science that could help them. People of color often develop diabetes and heart disease at earlier ages than white populations, excluding them from research studies that track individuals over time.

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So in a new study, Reeves, a social epidemiologist at Stanford University, decided to rejigger data from a long-running analysis of women’s health: the Study of Women’s Health Across the Nation (SWAN). Since 1994, the U.S.-based project has been tracking the health of middle-age and older women as they get older. But it had been leaving people out.

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For the new analysis, Reeves and her colleagues examined the roughly 9000 women who had been excluded in the previous iteration of the study because these restrictions didn’t account for weathering. Then the researchers effectively “enrolled” these women in SWAN, matching up their data with similar participants who were included in the study in order to see how their health trajectories compared with those of the previous cohort.

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