

The Health Care Professional's Guide to Connecting With Black Patients From Screening to Breast Cancer Care

Tips and advice for creating a care plan that's clinically and culturally competent for your Black female patient.

Understanding your patient is vital to developing a care and treatment plan that reflects her unique needs. This guide has recommendations to help your Black patients feel comfortable, heard, and understood in all your interactions.

What is equitable care?

Equitable care is providing care that does not vary in quality due to personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and socioeconomic status.¹



Black women are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer at a younger age and are approximately **41% more likely to die compared to white women in the United States.²**

While there may be several factors at play, Black women face an elevated risk of recurrence after early breast cancer detection and treatment and a higher percentage of late stage diagnoses.^{2,3}

Self-assessment for ensuring an unbiased experience

We all have biases. Have you ever stopped to consider potential biases in your interactions with Black patients? For example, when you think about the last time you treated a Black patient, what was your interaction like? Did you consider:

- ✓ **How the needs of your Black patients differ from your white patients?**
- ✓ **All the possible ways to provide a care plan that gives your Black patients care that is equitable to your white patients?**
- ✓ **Whether your patients have the support resources needed to successfully navigate their breast cancer experience?**

Establishing trust

Put yourself in your mother or daughter's shoes

If she's quiet, she may be processing what you shared and thinking of the many people who are relying on her or who she may want to share this journey with. Give her time to process what she's hearing. If needed, consider bringing in support such as a nurse or patient navigator.

Black patients may feel unseen or unheard when visiting their doctor, which could cause them to shut down and not share critical information that could make all the difference in their treatment.⁴ Consider this data:

✓ **47%* of Black women diagnosed with breast cancer have reported an incidence of race-based discrimination compared to 16% of white women.⁶**

✓ **Among Black women who believe they have experienced prejudice or discrimination within the medical health care system based on their race, 53%* report that it's difficult to find a health care provider who makes them feel heard and seen.⁴**

*These numbers are likely higher as data suggests that the level of racism Black women experience in the health care system is under reported.

**Black providers
comprise only
~3% of
practicing
oncologists.⁵**

It is essential to vocalize and offer reassurance that she will receive quality care and have the full support of the cancer care team.

Here's how you can help establish trust with your patient

Connect:

- By maintaining eye contact when greeting her
- Through engaging her in conversation to create a safe space that encourages openness
- Over something that she shares to establish common ground

Ask:

- About the check-in process and if the front desk was kind and respectful
- Whether today's visit is causing her any concerns and if so, why
- If she has a care support circle and whether she'd like to include them in her care plan or keep her diagnosis private
- If there are people who may depend on her
- About their overall lifestyle, such as mental health, nutrition, exercise, and activity levels

Explain:

- The statistics impacting Black women and why you're committed to being part of the solution
- Her diagnosis and the treatment plan you're recommending, and why
- How important it is that she made this step to prioritize her health

If your patient seems hesitant or reluctant when discussing the screening process:

- ✓ **Explain why you're recommending screening and assure her she is taking an important step for her overall health**
- ✓ **Ask about her family history with cancer (maternal and paternal)**
 - If she doesn't know, encourage her to find out what she can and share her discovery at her next visit
 - If she discloses a family history of cancer, remind her of the importance of being vigilant due to higher risk factors
- ✓ **Explain various screening options and which option is most accurate in detecting abnormalities**
 - Consider how Black women are more likely to have dense breasts, which may require additional follow up testing or exams
- ✓ **Explain how long it will take to get the results and what to expect when the results come in**
- ✓ **Reiterate the importance of early detection given Black women tend to be diagnosed with breast cancer at a younger age**

Black women are nearly twice as likely as white women to receive a breast cancer diagnosis at an advanced stage of the disease.⁷



“Health care professionals need to accept some level of responsibility for the devastating mortality rate difference (41%) between their Black and white breast cancer patients. True health equity will come when doctors use the golden rule by giving the same standard of care to patients that they would expect for themselves and their families.”

Ricki Fairley

TNBC Thriver, Co-founder and CEO of TOUCH, The Black Breast Cancer Alliance and More Than Just Words Advisor

If cancer is detected:

Let her know that you are prioritizing her care, are aware of the statistics - reminding her she is more than a number and that you are committed to helping her achieve an optimal outcome.

- ✓ **Ask her whether she'd like to pause and reach out to someone in her support circle to be part of her care plan discussion, as appropriate**
- ✓ **Explain what she should expect next and if possible, provide a care roadmap**
 - Make sure to discuss the bigger picture of her diagnosis, current and next steps in her treatment journey, as well as the potential need for long-term adjuvant therapy for those diagnosed in early stages
- ✓ **Ask if she would like to be connected to another patient who has been through a similar experience as a breast cancer support partner/guide**
- ✓ **Discuss treatment goals and priorities such as long-term survival and quality of life and share how, together, you can help her decide the best treatment options, including whether a clinical trial is right for her situation**

Black patients constituted only 3% of participants in the breast cancer clinical trials that led to U.S. Food and Drug Administration approvals between 2008-2018.⁸

Working to increase participation in clinical trials may lead to more effective treatment options for Black women in the future.

Questions to create a more productive dialogue

Instead of asking:

✗ **Do you understand everything I just shared?**

✗ **Are you married or do you have family to help you?**

✗ **Are you staying compliant with your treatment?**

✗ **Do you need to speak with a psychiatrist?**

✗ **Do you have the means to pay for your treatment?**

Ask this:

✓ **Can I answer any questions for you about what we have been talking about?**

✓ **Who would you like to be part of your breast care experience? This is a time when you need people who love you around you, so think about who you would like to be part of your care team.**

✓ **Do you have any questions or concerns about maintaining your treatment regimen? We can always discuss alternatives if you're finding it difficult to take the treatment as prescribed.**

✓ **I know this may be difficult and you may be feeling anxious, but my team and I are here to help. We have some people and resources that we can connect you to if you want to talk to someone.**

✓ **Resources are available to assist with cost of treatment and I can help you get to them if you need.**

Emphasize your commitment to her care

Tips:

- ✓ Remind her of the key takeaway from her visit. Provide it in writing for later reference, if possible
- ✓ Direct her to patient advocacy groups that may provide support, such as The Chrysalis Initiative, TOUCH, The Black Breast Cancer Alliance, and Living Beyond Breast Cancer
- ✓ Encourage her to share what challenges are on her mind
- ✓ Offer to help her schedule the appropriate next visit

Black patients need to be able to trust that they'll get the appropriate treatment and care for their cancer. Follow up with her and remember it takes time to build trust.



“ In order to eliminate disparities in cancer outcomes, it is important for health care professionals to address structural racism and unconscious bias in the care setting. Racist care is not care at all. ”

Jamil Rivers

MBC Patient, CEO of Chrysalis Initiative and *More Than Just Words* Advisor

Resources to share with your patient as a follow-up



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