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US Blacks, Hispanics more likely to experience health care discrimination

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Patients of color are more likely to report that their concerns are dismissed by health providers, a recent study finds.

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Older Black and Hispanic adults in the U.S. report health care discrimination at higher rates than in comparable wealthy countries, putting their care at risk, an April report finds.

Overall, 32% of study participants in the U.S. said they experienced discrimination in health care, the highest rate among 11 wealthy countries analyzed.

For the study, researchers from the Commonwealth Fund used data from the organization's 2021 International Health Policy Survey of Older Adults, which involved almost 2,000 people in the U.S. Patients reported dismissal of their concerns or symptoms, inadequate language services, insurance barriers and other factors.

Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Norway had the least discrimination in health care, while the U.S., Switzerland and Canada had the most.

“Battling discrimination throughout the health care system is imperative to advancing health equity,” the report said. “Given that older adults use far more health care services than do younger people, and that the U.S. population is rapidly aging, addressing discrimination in health care settings is especially important for older adults of color.”

People who reported discrimination were also more likely to be unhappy with their care, endure poor health outcomes and have financial difficulties.

“Previous research on older adults of color found that perceived discrimination was associated with an increased risk of avoiding or delaying care, in part because doctors may communicate messages that discourage appropriate use of health services,” the report said.

Gender is also a factor in who experiences discrimination. Almost half of older Black women in the U.S. said health care providers cared for them differently because of their race. Among Black, white and Hispanic seniors, more women reported being treated differently compared to men.

The report also found that people who were discriminated against were more likely to require additional medical care. Nearly half reported being in fair or poor health, twice the rate of those who did not experience discrimination. They were also more likely to experience issues with social isolation, mental health, material hardships and dissatisfaction with care compared to patients who did not experience discrimination.

To help address the issues, researchers recommended new satisfaction surveys, improving medical school curricula, updating harmful policies, enhancing the diversity of the workforce and providing more culturally appropriate health care.

For more information on “How Discrimination in Health Care Affects Older Americans, and What Health Systems and Providers Can Do,” visit www.commonwealthfund.org.

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