Objective: To describe grandparenthood status and determine the relationship between grandparenthood status, metabolic control, and psychosocial factors in African American women with type 2 diabetes.

Methods: A secondary, descriptive, exploratory analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between grandparenting status, physiologic indices related to metabolic control (body mass index, hemoglobin A1c, systolic blood pressure, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol) and psychosocial factors (emotional distress and quality of life) in a sample of 109 urban midlife African American women with type 2 diabetes.

Results: Grandmothers made up 60% of the sample and were stratified into three groups on the basis of caretaking status. Grandmothers who cared for but did not live with grandchildren had the highest body mass index, hemoglobin A1c, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol, and systolic blood pressure. Caregiving grandmothers also had higher diabetes-related emotional distress scores but had better quality of life scores than did the non-caretaking grandmothers. Non-grandmothers had the lowest quality of life scores.

Conclusions: These findings suggest relationships between grandmother caretaking status and metabolic and psychosocial factors. Research is needed to further examine these relationships and implications on practice and policy decisions. (Ethn Dis. 2008;18:141–146)

Key Words: Grandparenthood, African American Women, Type 2 Diabetes, Psychosocial Factors, Caregiver Role

INTRODUCTION

One in four African American women >55 years of age has type 2 diabetes,1 and the death rates due to type 2 diabetes are higher in these women than in any other racial or ethnic group;2 diabetes is the second leading cause of death among African American women.3 Research has demonstrated that lower levels of blood glucose over time can diminish the incidence of macrovascular and microvascular complications in patients with both type 1 and 2 diabetes.4,5 In addition to a higher prevalence of diabetes, African Americans have higher hemoglobin A1c (HbA1c) than other groups,6 and well-functioning older adults with diabetes, particularly those with poorer glycemic control, report a higher prevalence of functional limitation than do those without diabetes.7

The incidence and prevalence of type 2 diabetes is expected to increase, particularly in ethnic minority groups, and a rising trend over the past 15 years has been for more grandparents to raise their grandchildren. In 2000, 5.8 million grandparents were living with their grandchildren, and 2.4 million of them had primary caretaking responsibility.8 The likelihood of being a grandparent raising grandchildren also varies by sex and race. Of the 5.8 million co-resident grandparents, 64% are women; 2% of White grandparents live with their grandchildren, compared with 8% of African Americans and 8% of Hispanics. However, African Americans are more likely (52%) to be primary caregivers than are Hispanics (35%).8 Given that 25% of African American women aged ≥55 years have type 2 diabetes,2 many grandmothers with diabetes are likely taking care of their grandchildren.

Several studies have found that African American women are more likely to be custodial grandparents as well as widowed, divorced, or separated.9,10 Grandmothers who raise grandchildren alone are also more likely to face economic hardship, and in many cases they report incomes below the poverty level.11,12 Most women are raising their grandchildren because of a crisis or problem with the child’s parent. The most commonly cited reasons among all racial and ethnic groups are substance abuse, neglect or abandonment of the child, physical or emotional abuse, incarceration, and death.13–15 Several studies have reported higher levels of stress among caretaking grandmothers.14,16–19 In a study comparing non-custodial grandparents with grandparents raising grandchildren with and without behavioral problems, researchers found a higher level of parental role strain, financial strain, and life disruption between the two groups of custodial grandparents at baseline and at six months.20,21 Although caring for grandchildren can be difficult, some grandmothers report improved emotional health, satisfaction, and personal development.15,22–24

The caregiving role is often a barrier to self-management, especially regarding diet and lifestyle modification.25 Grandmothers who raise grandchildren...