

# UPDATES FROM US HEALTH AGENCIES

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Recent activity in government and non-government agencies may affect readers of *Ethnicity & Disease* and other healthcare professionals working with ethnic minority and under-served populations. Below are some current items of interest.

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## FROM THE EUNICE KENNEDY SHRIVER NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CHILD HEALTH AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (NICHD)

### Treating Even Mild Gestational Diabetes Reduces Birth Complications

A National Institutes of Health network study provided the first conclusive evidence that treating pregnant women who have even the mildest form of gestational diabetes can reduce the risk of common birth complications among infants and blood pressure disorders among mothers. Treatment of severe gestational diabetes is known to benefit mothers and infants. Although treatment is routinely prescribed for all women with gestational diabetes, before the current study, no evidence showed whether treating the mild form of the condition

benefited or posed risks for mothers or their infants.

The researchers found that, compared with the women's untreated counterparts, women treated for mild gestational diabetes had smaller, leaner babies less likely to be overweight or abnormally large and less likely to experience shoulder dystocia, an emergency condition in which the baby's shoulder becomes lodged inside the mother's body during birth. Treated mothers were also less likely to undergo cesarean delivery, to develop high blood pressure during pregnancy, or to develop preeclampsia, a life-threatening

complication of pregnancy that can lead to maternal seizures and death.

"Whether to treat mild gestational diabetes has never been entirely clear," said study co-author Catherine Y. Spong, chief of the Pregnancy and Perinatology Branch at NICHD. "The study results show conclusively that both mothers and infants do better when gestational diabetes is controlled." In most cases, treatment for gestational diabetes consists of lowering blood sugar levels through proper diet and exercise. If diet and exercise alone fail to lower blood sugar levels, women may be treated with drugs.

Previous studies suggest that the higher birthweights and greater proportion of body fat seen in the newborns of women with gestational diabetes also pose increased health risks for these children later in life. The children are more likely than other children to be overweight and, as adults, more likely to have impaired glucose tolerance, a prediabetic condition. "The children would need to be followed long term to be certain, but it's possible that treating women with mild gestational diabetes to reduce birthweight and body fat among their newborns may benefit these children later in life," Dr. Spong said.

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## FROM THE NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE (NCI)

### MicroRNAs in Blood May be Biomarkers of Pancreatic Cancer

Small molecules known as microRNAs, which can be detected in blood samples, have the potential to identify patients with pancreatic cancer, a study finds. Pancreatic cancer is a highly fatal disease that is difficult to detect at early stages. In most patients, symptoms do not appear until the cancer is locally advanced or has spread to other

parts of the body. The absence of symptoms in early-stage disease and the current lack of effective, minimally invasive screening and diagnostic techniques limit the available treatment options. Both contribute to the high death rate observed for patients with pancreatic cancer.

"The development of a minimally invasive test for the early

detection and diagnosis of pancreatic cancer is greatly needed," said Sudhir Srivastava, PhD, chief of the Cancer Biomarkers Research Group in NCI's Division of Cancer Prevention. "An important step is to identify biomarkers for pancreatic cancer, such as microRNAs, circulating in the bloodstream that can be used to distinguish individuals with pancreatic cancer from individuals without the disease."

MicroRNAs, or miRNAs, are short strands of RNA. The miRNAs regulate gene expression by controlling the translation of a specific type of RNA called messenger RNA, which relays the genetic instructions for making proteins. Previous research has indicated that miRNAs regulate normal cell proliferation and in cancer. Altered patterns of miRNA expression have been seen in pancreatic cancer as well as many other cancers. In

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addition, tumor-derived miRNAs can be detected in blood, and these molecules are stable in stored samples. Thus, miRNAs

circulating in the blood could be novel biomarkers for the detection and diagnosis of pancreatic cancer.

Pancreatic cancer, the fourth most common cause of cancer death in the United States, has a poor survival rate compared with

that of other types of cancer. Less than 5% of patients with pancreatic cancer survive 5 years past diagnosis.

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## FROM THE OFFICE OF MINORITY HEALTH (OMH)

### Department of Health and Human Services Launches Documentary on African American Infant Mortality

The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched a documentary on the work of student peer educators seeking to raise awareness of disparities in infant mortality rates that affect African American communities. The students participate in the HHS “A Healthy Baby Begins with You” campaign, which involves community, civic, and public health organizations. The video follows the peer educators as

they work with high-school and middle-school students and in church and community venues to teach people that healthy living is one of the interventions needed to reduce the communitywide prevalence of infant mortality.

“Preparing for a healthy pregnancy is a lifelong process,” said OMH Assistant Deputy Director Dr. Garth Graham. “We want our peer educators to send that message to our youth. You can’t wait for pregnancy to start

doing the right things. You need to start the day you are born.” In the African American community, infant mortality is 13 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, compared with 6.5 infant deaths per 1,000 live births for non-Hispanic Whites.

An important feature of the campaign is its focus on boys and men as well as women and girls. “Boys and men need to be aware of their roles in a healthy community,” said author and media commentator Jeff Johnson. “Fathers have to take the lead, but only the education of our young boys from a very early

age will make a dent in the issues that we face. That’s why I’m happy to see the way this campaign involves young men as peer educators.”

The campaign was begun by OMH in 2007 with students and faculty mentors from historically Black colleges and universities—Spelman College, Atlanta; Fisk University and Meharry Medical School, Nashville; Morgan State University, Baltimore—and from the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, Philadelphia.