



# Black History Month



# Theme: Health and Wellness

Black History Month honors the achievements and recognizes the struggles of African Americans.

Originally founded as Negro History Week by the noted historian Carter G. Woodson and others, the month carries with it an annual theme designated by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History.

This year's theme is Black Health and Wellness, and it's keyed to exploring more deeply both the diaspora's access disparities and unique challenges, while also celebrating Black pioneers in medicine.

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again showcased the disparity in health care for Black people and other minorities. In most instances, the problem dates back to prejudices and practices from decades ago, even centuries. But there were great men and women along the way, as well — African Americans who made huge strides for everyone while setting new standards.

Dr. Rebecca Lee Crumpler, for instance, became the first Black woman in to earn a medical degree in the U.S. after years of serving as a nurse. Dr. James McCune Smith was the first Black American to earn a medical degree, although he was forced to attend the University



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Dr. Charles Richard Drew (top right) is known as the father of blood banking for his work on preserving blood.

of Glasgow due to Jim Crow-era admissions practices in his home country. He later became the first Black person to own and operate his own pharmacy in the U.S.

Dr. Charles Richard Drew is now known as the father of blood banking, after pioneering preservation techniques that made donations far more widespread. Dr. Marilyn Hughes Gaston likewise became a pioneer in the study of sickle cell anemia, leading a groundbreaking 1986 study

that paved the way for a national screening program.

Dr. Regina Benjamin became America's 18th surgeon general.

Their achievements stand in direct contrast the difficulties their community has faced in getting safe, modern, economical health care. Black History Month's theme of Black Health and Wellness also underscores how the awful traditions of whites-only hospitals, discriminatory insurance policies and neglected Black medical facilities built a foundation of

poor medical outcomes and earlier death.

Left to themselves, Black people turned to folk remedies instead of a physician's care, hearkening back to the diaspora's African roots. Naturopaths, healers and midwives were commonplace. There was also widespread use of more cost-effective plant-based medicines, including garlic (for high blood pressure) and aloe vera (for issues of the skin). In some cases, those remedies

were later validated by scientists — but in the meantime, the differences in how Americans were cared for remained stark.

The 20th and 21st centuries saw huge advancements, including the passage of the Affordable Care Act, but there's still work to do. This year's Black History Month theme aims to highlight how the United States continues to fall behind other industrialized nations in providing medical care for all of its citizenry.

# History of Observance

The idea of celebrating the undeniable impact of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X and Barack Obama during Black History Month actually started much smaller.

This effort to establish a regular period of remembrance predates them all. Here's a look back at the history of this special observance.

## HOW BLACK HISTORY MONTH STARTED

Historian Carter G. Woodson, a University of Chicago alumnus with a large network of friends and colleagues, joined together with the Rev. Jesse E. Moorland and others to found the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915 — some 15 years before MLK was born. Woodson had come up with the idea after traveling to Washington, D.C., for a three-week event marking the 50th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. He was met there by thousands of others who enjoyed presentations on African Americans' community's often-overlook achievements. A new tradition was born. Now known as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, the



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Committee witnesses signing by Mayor John F. Collins proclaiming Negro History Week Feb. 8-15, 1965. Mayor Collins is pictured with Anna Bolitt Gardner, J. Markus Mitchell, Reverend Richard M. Owens, Katherine Hagerty, Herbert Fautajors, Catherine Satterwhite and Tom Francis.

group has remained focused on Woodson's original desire to research and inform others about the many advancements made by U.S. citizens of African descent. The first celebration, however, was known as Negro History Week.

The ASALH selected a date in February to mark the occasion, since both Frederick Douglass and Lincoln were born in that month and those dates were already commemorated in the Black community. But they weren't simply

looking back.

Woodson's stated hope was that understanding history would spur the Black community greater future achievements. He sent out a news release announcing the first Negro History Week in February 1926.

## EXPANSION AND RECOGNITION

Observations of Negro History Week continued to grow in popularity through the '40s, eventually inspiring other

February events like Negro Brotherhood Week. Black history became part of select curricula, too. Woodson passed in the 1950s, as the Civil Rights Movement started to emerge. The idea of lengthening Negro History Week began to take hold, and scattered cities started individually extending their commemorations over the following years.

Woodson often spoke in West Virginia, and Black people there were celebrating Negro History Month as early

as 1940s. Cultural activist Fredrick H. Hammaurab did the same in '60s-era Chicago. By 1976, President Gerald Ford had officially recognized Black History Month, in an announcement made as part of America's Bicentennial.

He encouraged U.S. citizens to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history," and that remains a guiding principle for us all.

# Heart Disease Risk

The good news is that African Americans are living longer, as pre-COVID death rates declined about 25% over the previous decade.

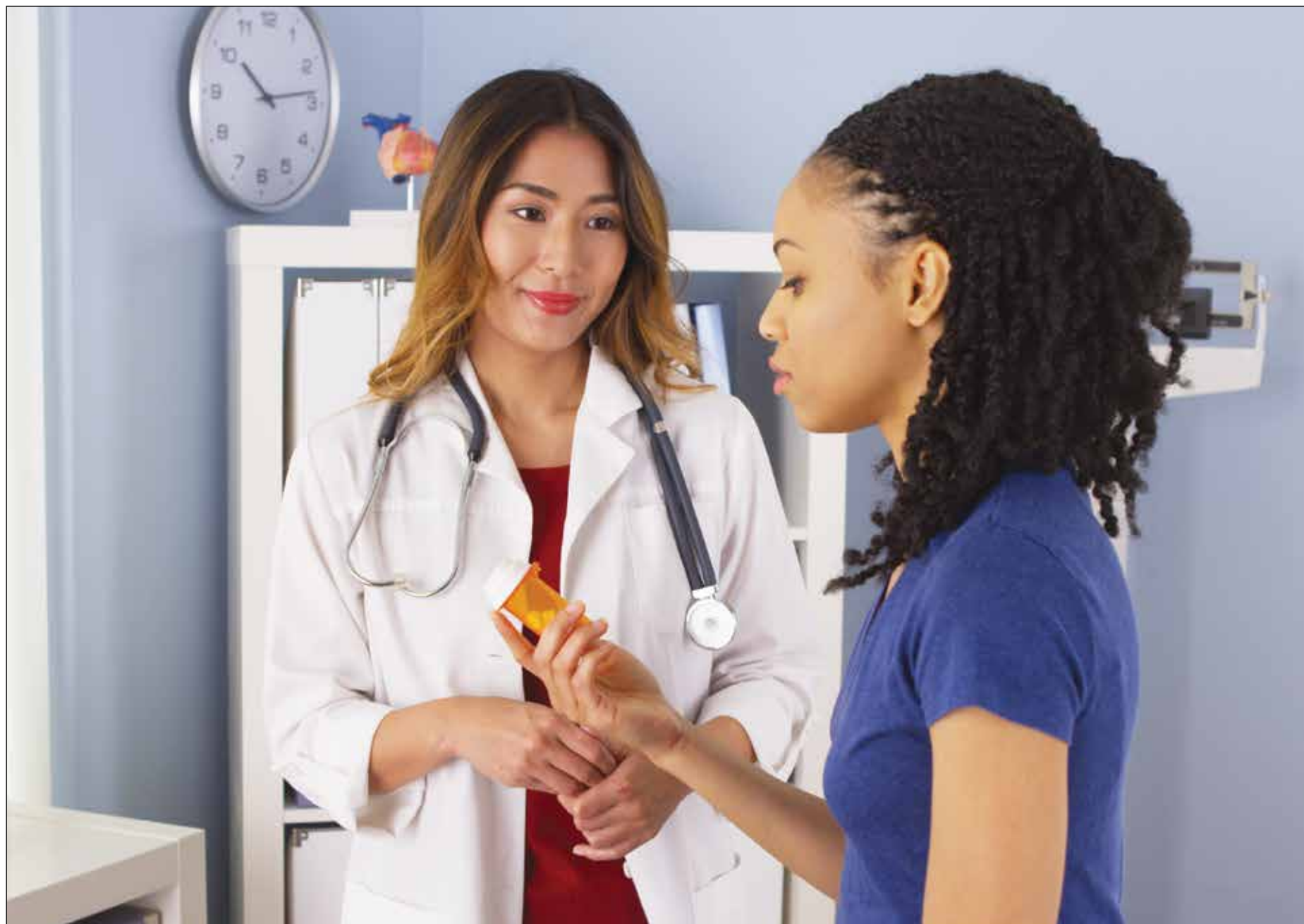
Even with those obvious advances, however, Black people are living with and often dying of complications from conditions like high blood pressure that are better managed in other communities.

These outcomes are typically due to economic conditions and access issues that are more common in the African American community. Sometimes, there is a lack of trust because of unfamiliarity, or historical issues with the medical community. Often, they may not see a doctor simply because of cost.

## INSIDE THE NUMBERS

Heart disease remains the leading cause of death among African Americans, with increasing numbers among formerly atypical demographics like women and the young. When a chronic illness begins early, it can lead to earlier death.

As it stands, Black people aged 18 to 49 are two times more likely to die from heart disease than whites, according to the CDC. African Americans between 35 and 64 are also 50% more likely to have high blood pressure.



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Black women are 60% more likely to suffer from hypertension than non-Hispanic white women.

Black History Month's theme of Black Health and Wellness gives us all a chance to reflect on the simple steps we can take to address heart disease. Your risk is heightened by high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes, issues that also play a role in strokes.

## ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

High blood pressure impacts African Americans more than any other race worldwide, and left untreated it can do permanent damage long before there are any debilitating symptoms. Hypertension is more severe among Black people, and also tends to develop earlier in their lives.

Start by being aware. Check your blood pressure regularly, even if you don't have a history of hypertension. Become familiar with your family's medical history, since that can play a role in developing high blood pressure. If there's a problem, seek medical attention immediately.

African Americans are also disproportionately suffering from obesity. Nearly 70% of

non-Hispanic Black people ages 20 and older, and more than 80% of women, are overweight. A healthy diet can help address this issue, along with a regimen of daily exercise. Similar advice is given to those dealing with diabetes, a major risk factor in both heart disease and stroke. Type 2 diabetes is preventable, and treatable — but you'll need to develop a plan with your doctor.

# Unsung Female Leaders

Towering figures like Martin Luther King Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois and Thurgood Marshall tend to dominate the story of the struggle for Civil Rights in America.

Only more recently have women like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Rosa Parks begun to share the spotlight more equally. But that still leaves scores of unsung female heroes who played a significant role in the movement for racial equality. Here's a look back a few of them:

## **ELLA BAKER (1903-1986)**

Though highly respected, Baker was a force away from the spotlight, mentoring and supporting Dubois, Marshall and King. She built her reputation as a movement builder, rather than as an outsized star, to the point that Baker was given the nickname Fundi — a Swahili word for someone who teaches the next generation.



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## **DAISY BATES (1914-1999)**

A newspaper publisher by trade, Bates played a key role in desegregating schools as president of the Arkansas chapter of the NAACP. She was a guiding hand in enrolling nine African American students in an all-white Little Rock high school, setting in motion a journey toward education equality.

## **SEPTIMA POINSETTE CLARK (1898-1987)**

The “mother of the Civil Rights Movement,” Clark was a teacher activist who helped

## **Dorothy Height**

pave the way for Black educators to be hired by the city of Charleston South Carolina. She remained a dogged advocate of education, teaching literacy classes so that her Black neighbors could register to vote. President Jimmy Carter awarded Clark the Living Legacy Award in 1979.

## **DOROTHY HEIGHT (1912-2010)**

Height was a principal organizer of 1963's March on Washington, working behind the scenes with far more famous Civil Rights activists like Martin Luther King Jr. She later co-founded the National Women's Political Caucus, and



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**Left to right:** Rosa Parks, Septima Clark and Parks' mother, Leona McCauley at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tenn., in December 1956.

was awarded the President Medal of Freedom by Bill Clinton in 1994.

## **DIANE NASH (1938- )**

A member of the Freedom Riders, Nash served as a student leader during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, co-founding both the Student

Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Selma Voting Rights Movement. Her efforts continue to speak to the power of our youth to spur change.

## **ANN ROBINSON (1912-1992)**

The heroes of 1955's bus

boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, are seemingly well known — except Robinson. She distributed more than 50,000 flyers calling for the boycott after the arrest of Rosa Parks. Her fierce calls for justice and commitment to nonviolent protest helped define the era.



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# How to Celebrate Virtually

With an influx of new coronavirus variants, some may be understandably wary of gathering in larger groups to celebrate Black History Month.

You don't have to miss this opportunity for reflection and celebration. Here are some virtual ways to take part.

## TAKE AN ONLINE TOUR

Virtual tours of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture offer unforgettable at-home history lessons, with online access to more than 3,500 exhibits. You can also click through Los Angeles' Museum of African

American Art, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site and the Gordon Parks Foundation, which showcases his incredible photographs focused on urban life and race relations, among many others. Groups like Unexpected Virtual Tours offer interactive experiences that you can enjoy right at home, too.

## DONATE TO A NONPROFIT

Find a Black-led nonprofit, whether local or national, that aligns with your charitable interests. Maybe it's 100 Black Men of America or Black Girls Code, or an area pet rescue run by an African American neighbor. If you don't already have a favorite place to direct your donations, search Charity Navigator for a list of nonprofits founded by Black people.

## ORDER TAKE OUT

Place a delivery or to-go order from a local black-owned restaurant, or play host to a socially distant dinner party via Zoom or FaceTime. If you're feeling adventurous, map out a whole new place at [eatblackowned.com](http://eatblackowned.com). Whether sharing an insider tip on a favorite dinner spot or trying something entirely new, you'll be supporting the dream of an African American entrepreneur, their family and everyone who worked to make your meal perfect.

## MAKE A PLAYLIST

Black musicians played a foundational role in America's music, from the blues and jazz to rock 'n' roll and hip hop. Celebrate them all by creating a Black History Month playlist using an online service like Spotify. Looking

to expand beyond the acts and albums you already know? Check out NPR's Black History Month-themed Tiny Desk Concerts, or Spotify's Black History is Now hub. When you're done, you'll have a cool commemorative soundtrack for all of February — or any month.

## AMPLIFY BLACK VOICES

Use your personal social-media channels to promote the ideas and works of Black thinkers. Again, these may be figures who are world famous or a colleague who offers something particularly insightful. Diversify your newsfeed, then follow and share posts to amplify and contextualize the African American experience. Go deeper with a search through FindSpark's expansive list of Black media influencers.

# Health Insurance Equity

Black Health and Wellness, the theme for 2020's Black History Month, isn't just about doctors, diets and doing more exercise.

The wellness journey for generations of African Americans has also been shaped by both historic obstacles even among more recent gains in health insurance.

The uninsured rate for Black Americans declined significantly after the Affordable Care Act was passed. More than 20 million people gained coverage under the ACA, and nearly three million of them were African American. Still, the uninsured rate among Black people is often double that of their white counterparts. Some 38% are on Medicaid.

The ACA made progress toward universal coverage, but costs still mean that access is a challenge for African Americans who don't participate. The average American family spends about 11 percent of their total income on health care, including premiums, co-pays, prescriptions and other out-of-plan bills. But those same dollars represent a much larger percentage of income for the average Black family, which because of pay disparity may be spending more like 20% of their household



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income on wellness.

Millions more are underinsured, meaning doctor or hospital visits put a strain on their finances or even require going into debt. Nearly 20% of U.S. adults who are underinsured are African American.

Some may be helped with Medicaid expansions on the state level, but a number of

governors and local legislatures are opting out. Following a trend, that leaves people of color as the ones most likely to find themselves in a coverage gap. They earn too much to qualify under the original Medicaid guidelines, but not enough to earn premium tax credit in the ACA marketplace.

These aren't the only reasons why cost-friendly, fair coverage options is so important.

There are still marked differences in outcomes between Black people and whites in the areas of infant and maternal mortality, cancer, diabetes and heart disease. African American females are three

times more apt to die in pregnancy than whites. The Black infant mortality rate is twice that of whites. Across a range of chronic maladies, simply being African American means you're more likely to die compared to other groups.

Affordable health care might literally be the difference between life and death.

# Modern Civil Rights Leaders

Too often, discussion of Civil Rights heroes end with figures from history.

Important though they may be, new generations have followed in the hallowed footsteps of Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Thurgood Marshall. Here's a look some of our modern-day Civil Rights leaders.

**MICHELLE ALEXANDER**  
Law professor,  
Ohio State University

Michelle Alexander became a thought leader in the modern Civil Rights era after publishing "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness." Her book argues that a prison system that's disproportionately filled with Black men has replaced discriminatory 20th century laws as the new brand of racial suppression. Dr. Cornel West of Harvard University said it's a must-read for activists of today in the book's forward.

**MELANIE CAMPBELL**  
CEO, National Coalition on  
Black Civic Participation

A focus on civic engagement brought Melanie Campbell to wider renown, in particular her involvement in the Black Youth Vote! leadership development program.

**PATRISSE CULLORS**  
Co-founder, Black Lives Matter

Patrisse Cullors started Dignity and Power Now to push for police reform in Los Angeles County, while also calling for a more dignified approach to incarceration. She created the original #BlackLivesMatter hashtag after Trayvon Martin was fatally shot in 2012.

**JOHNETTA ELZIE**  
Co-editor, This Is the Movement  
The widespread protests following

the lethal police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, didn't have an official leader but Johnetta Elzie nevertheless became one the effort's most prominent voices. She helped found a digital movement called We the Protesters that tracks police violence and seeks to hold law enforcement accountable.

**JAMES RUCKER**  
Co-founder, Color of Change  
Color of Change is an enormous web-based group that uses social networking to address the racial issues of our day. Under the leadership of James Rucker and others, it has grown to nearly 2 million members.

**ESMERALDA SIMMONS**  
Executive director, Center for  
Law and Social Justice  
Based in the Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, New York, the Center for Law and Social Justice is just another avenue for Esmeralda Simmons to fight for the rights of the underserved and underprivileged. A longtime advocate for better public education as an attorney, Simmons now provides legal services in the growing area of voter suppression.

**BRYAN STEVENSON**  
Founder and executive director,  
Equal Justice Initiative  
Bryan Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative to highlight and push back against racial disparities in the justice system, something he's witnessed up close as a practicing attorney. Their research has uncovered an astounding 800 lynching incidents that had never been previously disclosed.



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