

A BLACK WOMAN'S GUIDE

Reproductive Justice and Womb Health

INTRODUCTION

Black Women for Wellness loves Black people and we look forward to future generations of our beauty, culture, knowledge, ingenuity and contribution to the world. Our future begins with womb health and knowing how to preserve and enhance our reproductive health and well-being. By focusing on reproductive health challenges and solutions for African-American and Black women, we wish to contribute to the health of our community, the strength of our culture and hold sacred the space where our futures are created.

As part of this mission, Black Women for Wellness has collaborated with the California Women's Law Center to create *Womb Health & Healing* – a reproductive health guide specifically written for African-American and Black women. The purpose of the guide is to help women make better, more informed decisions about their reproductive health, increase their awareness of and access to reproductive rights and serve as an unbiased resource in strategizing and planning for their reproductive future.

Although *Womb Health & Healing* is specifically targeted at women who are seeking to take control of their lives, pursue their dreams and recognize that they are sexual beings, we know that this is not every woman - and that's alright. This guide includes information that *every* woman can use, wherever she may be in life's great journey. It is also for men who hold the women in their lives sacred and crave a bit of information about women's bodies.

When and Where We Enter

In her book, *When and Where I Enter*, Paula Giddings provides a detailed account of the African-American experience in the United States. Our history is unique. It begins with the capture and enslavement of our ancestors and continues with over 400 years of forced, back-breaking labor, rape, and inhumane, unequal treatment. Not surprisingly, basic health needs, like proper nutrition and adequate medical care, were not part of the African-American "experience" for several hundred years.

Unfortunately, this history of deprivation and inequality continues to affect and shape the health status of African-Americans today. The conditions during slavery, the subsequent Jim Crow era and continuing racism are all linked to present day disparities in the health status between Black and White Americans. African-Americans, across the socio-economic spectrum, have poorer health outcomes compared to their White counterparts. For example, African-Americans still live an average of six to seven years less than Whites.¹ Black mothers have the highest infant mortality rates – Black infants die at more than twice the rate of White and Hispanic infants.² The fertility rate of Black women has declined 54.3% in the last 60 years.³

Black Women for Wellness believes that it is important to understand this history and background. Insight from our past will help us to achieve better health outcomes in the future. Our historical note is simply that, not the beginning, certainly not the

¹ Gabrielle Amersbach, *Through the Lens of Race: Unequal Health Care in America*, Harvard Public Health Review, Winter 2002.

² *Id.*; National Vital Statistics Report, Vol. 50, No. 15, September 16, 2002.

³ Eyityao Onifade, *Black Power, Eugenics and Reproductive Rights: The Clash Revisited*. Emerging Minds, May 1, 2006.

end, but an important note to share with you about our philosophical perspective and how this information guide comes to you. It is why we believe that cultural competency and knowing our history, particularly our medical history, is imperative to improving and enhancing our health status. Black Women for Wellness is on a mission to enhance the health and well-being of Black women and to preserve our wombs so that we can bring healthy, future generations to life.

Definitions

According to the World Health Organization, **reproductive health** means having a satisfying and safe sex life with the ability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if and when to do so. Implicit in the last condition is your right to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of birth control. Reproductive health also includes a woman's right to have access to appropriate healthcare services that will enable her to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth.

Family planning means the ability of individuals and couples to anticipate and attain their desired number of children, including the spacing and timing of their births. It includes factoring in all the goals, objectives, and people in your life, plotting a path and controlling your fertility. Family planning revolves around the central question: Do I plan to have children at some point in my life? Depending on your circumstances, you might be thinking of having a child in the near future or waiting several years. Or, you might not want to have any children at all. Whatever the case, it's always good to be fully informed as to your options.

Birth control is the specific strategy you choose to control your fertility and determine if and when you want to become a parent.

For Your Consideration:

Listed below are questions to consider when making decisions about family, reproduction, birth control and life as you experience it. These questions were derived from discussions with real women, from stories we heard in our work and from our own life experiences. This is not a test – it's simply food for thought; a tool to help you make better, more informed decisions about your life based on who you are.

Do you plan to have children?

This is a question that society, religion, partners, family and even the government are eager to influence and control, whether or not you seek their input. It is, however, your body and ultimately, *your* decision. We start with this question because it impacts all your other choices. If your answer is yes and you do plan to have children, then family planning is important. If your answer is no, and you are absolutely sure, other options should be considered. If you are unsure or undecided, you need to keep all of your options open.

Are you a “good girl” or a “bad girl?”

Do you feel awkward about carrying around birth control? Do you think planning for sex suggests that you're a “bad girl?” The media, fueled by racist stereotypes, has created a world that associates virginity and purity (white) with “good girls” and promiscuity and sexuality (black) with “bad girls.” African-American and Black women are often viewed as “bad girls” and stereotyped as highly sexualized women. We, as Black women, spend our time trying to deny and combat these negative stereotypes, which often causes us to ignore or repress our own sexuality or to think about it only in very specific circumstances. This has led to a profound silence within our community regarding issues of sex and sexuality. This collective silence

has come with a very high price – it has allowed sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS, to infiltrate and take hold of our community in numbers that are disproportionate to those in other communities.

Do your religious values influence your sexuality?

Every religion holds specific views about sex and sexuality. For example, many Catholics have been taught that masturbation is wrong. If you were taught this, how comfortable are you with touching yourself to insert a barrier method of birth control? Or maybe you were taught that all forms of birth control are taboo and to be avoided or that a woman should only have sex if she is married. It is important to know your religious values when making reproductive health choices. Most African-American and Black women hold spiritual values, which are different from religious values. By sorting these things out, you can help yourself to make better reproductive choices that work for you -- guilt free.

What is your sex life like?

How often are you having sex? If the answer is “not often,” you may not want to choose a method of birth control, such as the pill, where you have to take some sort of action every single day. The pill may also not be a good choice for you if you have a hectic lifestyle and it would be difficult to remember to take a pill every single day. Are you or your partner having sex with more than one person? If so, a barrier method of birth control may be best for you because these methods can limit the transmission of bodily fluids and infections. It is important to ask yourself these basic lifestyle questions because your answers can reveal significant insights into the types of birth control methods that are best for you.

Is your choice of birth control influenced by your partner?

For some men, sex with no barriers is seen as a sign of intimacy; a way for a woman to prove her love and commitment to the relationship. For others, birth control is simply too bothersome. Many men report that they don't like condoms, the ring gets in the way or that too much is going on with spermicides. Will your partner be able to convince you not to use the condom, just this once?

For many of us, our partners can greatly influence our decisions about birth control and it is important to acknowledge this fact. You need to consider just how much influence your partner has on your decisions, the consequences of giving into his wants and desires, and most importantly, whether you can live with those consequences. If the consequences are unacceptable (*e.g.*, getting pregnant), you need to develop a back-up plan.

What if you don't want to have children?

If you know for sure that you don't want to have any children, then you might want to consider birth control options that are permanent. It is much simpler – medically – for a man to have a vasectomy than for a woman to get her tubes tied (*i.e.*, tubal ligation). But many men are afraid, reluctant or down-right hostile to altering their ability to have children because they believe it affects their “manliness.” However, this may also be an issue for women. Would you still feel “womanly” if you chose a permanent form of birth control that affects your ability to have children? There are many important issues to consider before choosing any permanent forms of birth control.

Are you using sex as a bartering tool?

Black Women for Wellness has heard of young women who are in relationships in exchange for peace or protection from other

violence in our communities. We know of many women, both single and married, who trade sex for financial security or just to have a man around to repair and upkeep the home. And yes, we also know of women who use sex to keep their jobs, to hold leverage over men and as a means of social climbing. What type of birth control is most appropriate in these circumstances?

What about women for whom sex is their livelihood? What are important considerations in this situation? For example, if you are working as a prostitute, you might earn more money if you agree to have sex with no obvious form of birth control. In this case, you would need a “stealth” form of birth control – something that you can keep a secret. But keep in mind that only barrier methods, such as condoms, will protect you from STDs and HIV/AIDS.

Are you in a trusting and safe relationship?

For too many, unfortunately, the answer is no. Many women are currently in relationships with a partner who is abusive. Remember, abuse is more than simply physical. It can be emotional, mental and spiritual as well. A key early warning sign of an abusive, unhealthy relationship is a partner that seeks to isolate you, limits your ability to see your family and friends and creates tension or conflict in your personal relationships. Other warning signs include shouting or cursing at you, hitting or breaking things, threatening you (or your family and friends), being suspicious of you and hurting you physically or emotionally.

If you are in an abusive relationship, you need to consider how your relationship can affect your choice of birth control. For example, for some women, even the type of birth control they choose can trigger abuse from their partner. If this describes

your situation, you may want to choose a birth control method that you can keep secret from your partner, such as hormonal shots.