

# Understanding Heart Health Inequities During Black History Month

After years of decline, cardiovascular disease mortality is on the rise, with a disproportionate impact on Black Americans

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ShantaQuilette, 42, never saw herself as someone at risk for a heart condition. But in 2012, that all changed. During her usual run on the treadmill, the former accountant felt her heart flutter and immediately told her doctor. After several misdiagnoses and trips to the emergency room, she still hadn't received the care she needed. Six years later, she suffered a heart attack and a stroke.

Her stroke led her to seek answers. She learned that cardiovascular disease runs in her family, including her mother, who suffered a minor heart attack. She also learned that Black Americans have a disproportionately higher risk of cardiovascular disease.<sup>1</sup> Today, ShantaQuilette, the "vivacious" mother and tax accountant from Dallas, TX, dedicates her time to advocating for women – especially Black women like herself and her mother – helping them take charge of their cardiovascular health.

## The Disproportionate Burden of Cardiovascular Disease Among Black Americans

ShantaQuilette is not alone in her struggle. Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death each year in the US.<sup>2</sup> While the general US population loses 655 000 lives to cardiovascular disease annually, Black Americans are 30% more likely to die of cardiovascular disease than others.<sup>1,3</sup> And after decades of decline, cardiovascular disease mortality is on the rise in the US, with the alarming trend more pronounced among Black Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Why is this happening? Statistics show that Black Americans have higher rates of high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes – common conditions that increase the risk of cardiovascular disease.<sup>5</sup> Genetic factors contribute to these higher rates, as do societal factors such as gaps in income and education.<sup>6</sup> Other inequities, such as discrimination and health care access, can have a profound impact on treatment and health outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

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That's why ShantaQuilette is committed to increasing awareness in the Black community. "Cardiovascular disease is not usually discussed in the Black community, but we need to talk about these real issues – it could potentially save lives," she said.

## Fighting for Equity in Health Care

With February designated as both American Heart Month and Black History Month, now is an opportune time to call attention to rising cardiovascular disease mortality<sup>8</sup> and the need to reduce health care disparities. But

these issues are complex and require multi-faceted solutions and a year-round focus.

Lasting change starts with education. Promoting a healthy lifestyle can go a long way in preventing and curbing the risk of cardiovascular disease.<sup>8</sup> ShantaQuilette became an informed patient and decided to make lifestyle changes that included scaling back her hours at work to make time for healthier habits. She was able to change her work hours, exercise more and start spending more quality time with her children.

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Education and awareness are just the beginning. Systemic changes are needed as well. Implicit biases exist in the health care system, which can affect treatment access for patients with cardiovascular disease.<sup>7</sup> So ShantaQuilette now looks for doctors who “look like” her, underscoring the importance of having diverse health care providers and a strong patient-provider relationship.

“I need someone who understands me culturally,” she said. “To relate to my doctor in that way makes a difference.”

Finally, ShantaQuilette encourages Black women to discuss their family histories because it can inform their risks of cardiovascular disease or other chronic conditions. She’s also teaching her children to make healthy choices and take seriously the risk of cardiovascular disease.

## Taking the Pledge Against the Rise of Cardiovascular Disease

While the statistics for cardiovascular disease are disheartening, there are steps each of us can take to help create a healthier future. *The Legacy We Lead* is a Novartis initiative dedicated to halting the rise of cardiovascular disease-related deaths in the US. Centered on stories of patients like ShantaQuilette, caregivers, advocates and providers, *The Legacy We Lead* aims to inspire individuals to take a pledge to help stop the rising trend. Together, we can create a better future for people at risk of cardiovascular disease.

It’s important to take the pledge because my heart matters and so does yours. I think it’s an important pledge that challenges everyone to be proactive in their heart health.

**ShantaQuilette**, cardiovascular disease patient

Meet ShantaQuilette, who uses her voice to inspire the Black community to take charge of their heart health.

### Take the pledge today to lead a legacy of fewer lives lost to CVD.

Join the effort to create a healthier future. Take the pledge today – you’ll complete it in a heartbeat, and the benefits will last for generations to come.

[Learn more](#)

#### References:

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