

Hypertension Awareness Month

Roughly half of Americans are affected by hypertension, a condition characterized by persistent high blood pressure.

Hypertension raises the likelihood of severe health problems, including heart attack, stroke and kidney failure. May is Hypertension Awareness Month, a time for patients, clinicians and policymakers to recognize and reduce the risk of hypertension.

While hypertension is a nationwide crisis, an alarming trend is unfolding in rural America. Rural patients face more barriers and have higher rates of hypertension. In fact, the unadjusted prevalence of hypertension is **40%** in the most rural areas, compared to **29.4%** in the most urban areas.¹

The unadjusted prevalence of hypertension is **40%** in the most rural areas, compared to **29.4%** in the most urban areas.

Understanding the Rural Disparity

This disparity persists, in part, because rural Americans face more barriers to accessing health care. Contributing factors include deteriorating health infrastructure, longer travel distances to providers, a shortage of cardiologists and gaps in insurance coverage. A shocking 22 million Americans live in counties without access to a cardiologist.² This lack of cardiovascular resources has created “cardiology deserts,” which disproportionately affect non-white, aging and low-income and populations.³ Treatable, preventable conditions escalate into life threatening emergencies.

84% of counties experiencing the highest levels of childhood food insecurity are rural.

Access challenges in rural America extend beyond health care. Food insecurity is widespread, particularly in low-income areas, making it increasingly difficult for this population to incorporate healthy, nutritious foods into their diets. Fast-food restaurants dominate these “food deserts,” restricting options to high sugar, fat and sodium foods. **84%** of counties experiencing the highest levels of childhood food insecurity are rural.⁴ People living in “food deserts” face higher rates of preventable conditions, including hypertension.

Together, limited access to health care and healthy foods creates a vicious cycle that is difficult for rural Americans to escape. Without the guidance of a cardiologist or access to heart-healthy foods, rural Americans are left without the tools needed to manage their heart health.

The Cardiology Deserts Campaign

But America's hypertension crisis is not predetermined. Change is possible. The Cardiology Deserts Campaign, launched by the Association of Black Cardiologists, exemplifies the type of action that is needed. Through a community first approach, the campaign increases awareness and education in rural areas by expanding access to hypertension screenings, equipping primary care physicians with tools for earlier diagnosis and engaging directly with communities to promote heart disease prevention and healthy lifestyle practices.⁵

Addressing food insecurity must be a parallel priority. Health care providers should serve as trusted sources of education and support by identifying food insecurity and connecting patients with resources such as food assistance programs, food pantries, meal programs and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) offices.⁶

The Cardiology Deserts Campaign is a nationwide initiative from the Association of Black Cardiologists to improve cardiovascular care in rural and underserved communities.



Bottom Line for Policymakers

If action isn't taken soon, **25 million additional Americans** will develop hypertension by 2035 — disproportionately affecting rural and non-white communities. Tackling both health care access and food insecurity simultaneously is essential to combating the hypertension crisis that is running rampant in rural America.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Prevalence of self-reported hypertension and antihypertensive medication use by county and rural-urban classification -- United States, 2017." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 2017.

² Association of Black Cardiologists. "Association of Black Cardiologists launches a national initiative to address cardiology deserts."

³ Association of Black Cardiologists. "What are cardiology deserts -- and why policy action matters."

⁴ Rural Health Information Hub. "Rural hunger and access to healthy food: Overview."

⁵ Amgen. "Missing coordinates: America's cardiology deserts."

⁶ Rural Health Information Hub. "Rural hunger and access to healthy food: Overview." (Ibid.)