

# Perceptions of Health Among Black Women in Emerging Adulthood: Alignment with a Health at Every Size® Perspective

Vashti Adams, MSW, Aliya Gladden, MSW, Jaih Craddock, PhD, MSW, MA

**Background:** Efforts to improve health outcomes among Black women have typically encouraged weight control as a central component. However, as recent studies have highlighted the relative ineffectiveness of intentional weight loss in improving health outcomes and reducing risk of chronic disease, there is a need to consider alternative, non-weight loss-oriented approaches. Interventions based in the weight inclusive Health at Every Size (HAES) framework have been associated with positive physical and mental health outcomes. However, as such studies have scarcely included Black women as participants, it is unknown how findings may generalize to Black female populations.

**Purpose:** As a precursor to the development of any specific HAES-based interventions, this study sought to explore perceptions of health among Black women and the degree to which such perceptions align with HAES principles.

**SAMHSA Strategic Priority Alignment:** Integrating behavioral and physical health care

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 41 young Black women (aged 18-24) living in Los Angeles County through June-July 2018 as part of a larger, mixed-methods study. Participants were recruited via a combination of convenience and respondent-drive sampling. Interviews explored perceptions of good and poor health among Black women. Data were analyzed using principles of inductive thematic analysis and further interpreted within the HAES framework.

**Participants:** Highest level of education completed: Less than high school (12%), high school (45%), some college (43%); self rated health: fair (5%), good or better (95%).

**Results:** Participants' insights resulted in three main themes: (1) health is multidimensional, (2) good health means "taking care of yourself", and (3) systemic and environmental disparities impact Black women's health. These themes reflect three HAES principles of health enhancement, weight inclusivity, and eating for wellbeing.



UNIVERSITY of MARYLAND  
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

## Young Black women conceptualized health as a multidimensional construct influenced by both individual choices (e.g., care vs. neglect) and systemic factors

HAES principle of *health enhancement*: Health involves wellness across multiple dimensions

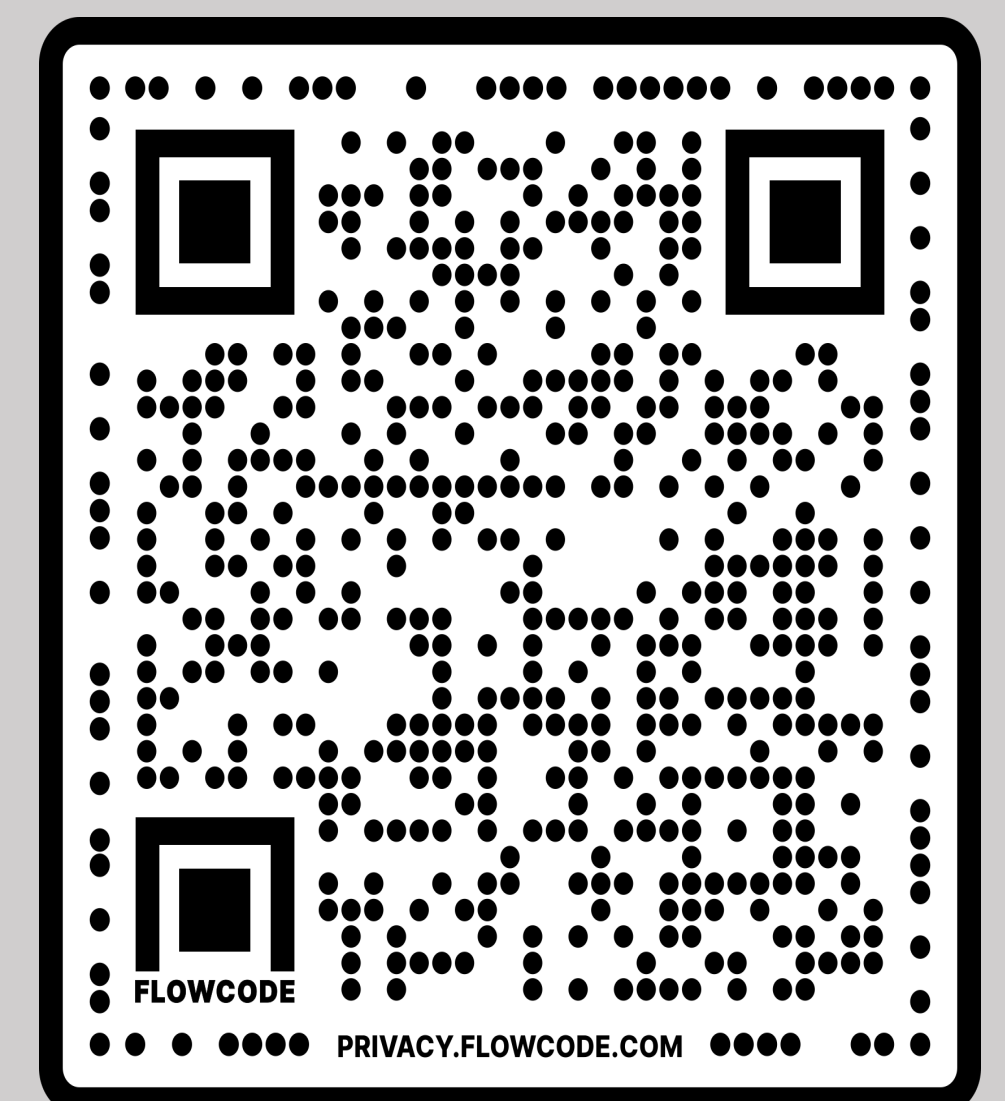
HAES principles of *eating for wellbeing and weight inclusivity*: Health is influenced by individual choices related to diet, exercise, and personal care. However, there is no specific size or diet that can define health for every woman

HAES principle of *health enhancement*: Health includes access to information and services, in addition to individual behaviors

Table 1. HAES Principles, as Defined by the Association for Size Diversity and Health (ASDAH)

Principle	Definition
Weight inclusivity	• Accept and respect the inherent diversity of body shapes and sizes and reject the idealizing or pathologizing of specific weights
Health enhancement	• Support health policies that improve and equalize access to information and services, and personal practices that improve human well-being, including attention to individual physical, economic, social, spiritual, emotional, and other needs
Eating for wellbeing	• Promote flexible, individualized eating based on hunger, satiety, nutritional needs, and pleasure, rather than any externally regulated eating plan focused on weight control
Respectful care	• Acknowledge our biases, and work to end weight discrimination, weight stigma, and weight bias. Provide information and services from an understanding that socio-economic status, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other identities impact weight stigma, and support environments that address these inequities.
Life-enhancing movement	• Support physical activities that allow people of all sizes, abilities, and interests to engage in enjoyable movement, to the degree that they choose.

Read full article here



**Conclusions:** Findings provide preliminary support for the alignment between HAES principles and perceptions of health for Black women in emerging adulthood. Prioritizing holistic wellbeing, attention to individualized health needs, and access to needed information and resources in efforts to improve health outcomes among members of this demographic may be promising.