

# Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.



CARLOS T. CARTER

## Cancer Prevention and research

*We are so excited to welcome Dr. Baskin to Pittsburgh. As she conducts listening sessions and reaches out to community leaders to assist with raising awareness about cancer prevention and research, what are some of the ways in which collaborating with the Urban League can be helpful?*

Given that the Urban League is deeply connected to Black Pittsburgh, we can do our part to educate our clients and community about the importance of cancer prevention.

Many people think that cancer is totally out of our control. That is not true. If we maintain proper diet and exercise and take part in early screenings, it can make a difference. Although there are environmental factors that we may not be able to change, there are things we can do to help prevent cancer!

As we think about cancer prevention in our region, what are some strategies to increase awareness about what we can do in our homes and neighborhoods to promote health and wellness including cancer screenings?

We should leverage social media to share stories where people have been able to change outcomes by having earlier screenings and taking charge of their health.

We also need to leverage any opportunity to demonstrate the importance of diet, exercise, and healthy living.

We can educate barbers, hairstylists, churches, schools, and communities to be community ambassadors to educate our people.

I especially believe that talking to kids in elementary school, while they are young, is important.

Finally, I cannot stress enough the importance of understanding family history and getting early screenings to help us avoid the untimely deaths and health related challenges that can often be prevented. Given that my dad had colon cancer, I make certain (or my wife makes me) to have regular colonoscopy screenings to manage my health.

At the end of the day, Black lives are precious and valuable, as any other group. We must take advantage of every opportunity to take care of our health! I want my fellow Black Pittsburghers to take care of themselves like Black Lives Matter! We cannot control everything, but we can do our part to maintain our health.

*Carlos T. Carter is President and CEO of Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh*

## Cancer screening based on family history can increase survival rates — but only if you know and tell

In January, we introduced the term “social determinants of health” (SDoH), which are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age.

SDoH are often the result of social, political, and economic forces beyond people’s control, including slavery, segregation, and redlining. These conditions continue to impact people daily and affect their health and quality of life.

When SDoH are favorable, people live healthier lives. When they’re not, the opposite is true. In Pittsburgh, health outcomes can vary greatly depending on your ZIP Code.

For hundreds of years in this country, systemic racism has created poor health outcomes. While inequities in healthcare have improved substantially in the U.S. in the last 50 years, access to quality healthcare, insurance coverage and cost, and provider availability and representation are far from equal.

In our city, for example, cancer is the leading cause of death. Of all the Pittsburghers who die from cancer, Black people die the most — and have the shortest survival of any racial and ethnic group for most types of the disease.

Dr. Monica L. Baskin, Associate Director of Community Outreach and Engagement and Associate Director for Health Equity, UPMC Hillman Cancer Center, is committed to making that survival rate higher and more equitable. Dr. Baskin is focused on giving Black people in Western Pa., equal access to quality

healthcare and helping to educate and empower them on ways to prevent major diseases, including cancer.

Before joining Pitt in 2022, Dr. Baskin spent 20 years in the Deep South (most recently at the University of Alabama at Birmingham) studying how to reduce health disparities through community-based programs that listen to underserved people and collaborate with communities to improve health.

She traces her career back to the loss of her father who died of colorectal cancer when he was just 51. “No child should lose a parent to such a preventable disease at such a young age,” she states. “I’ve made it my mission to help people avoid that huge loss.”

Dr. Baskin’s years of research have confirmed the important role of a healthy diet and exercise in preventing and controlling many types of diseases, including cancer. While SDoH are often out of people’s control, taking ownership of their health isn’t, especially what you eat and how much you move.

“One of the most important things you absolutely have control over is making a stake in your health,” she says. “Maintaining a healthy weight, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep is a way to affirm your physical and mental health for you and for the people you love.”

Another key to cancer prevention is knowing — and communicating — your family health history.

“Who in your family had cancer and on which



DR. MONICA L. BASKIN

side?” Dr. Baskin continues. “What kind of cancer? How old were they when they were diagnosed? Where and how were they treated? What was the outcome? These are important things you need to know, so you can share them with your healthcare provider. Being forthright with this information may mean you’re eligible for early screenings that are covered by insurance.”

In the case of Dr. Baskin’s father, who was diagnosed when the cancer was well advanced, screening may have saved his life. “With my father’s cancer, we know there were probably pre-cancerous polyps years before he was diagnosed. If he’d had an early screening, the doctor could have removed them.”

Family history also includes your past health be-

haviors, especially alcohol, tobacco, and drug use. “If you smoked cigarettes for 20 years, but gave it up 10 years ago, it’s important to tell your doctor. You might still be at risk for lung cancer and eligible for early screening.”

This knowledge and communication with your healthcare provider is an important part of self-advocacy. “You know your body better than anyone,” Dr. Baskin explains. “Trust your feelings. Don’t be afraid to talk about something that’s troubling you. If it’s easier to write down your concerns and give it to your provider, do that. Healthcare providers work for you. Don’t take no for an answer.”

In addition to preventing cancer, early screening can be the first step to increasing survival rates for Black

people with cancer. “If we catch cancer early, there are often more options available with less side effects. Your quality of life is better and you have a greater chance of a good outcome,” Dr. Baskin notes.

If you’re a Black person who’s diagnosed with cancer, Dr. Baskin hopes you’ll be open to participating in a clinical trial. “There are a lot of legitimate trust issues when it comes to our country’s healthcare system that we’re trying to make right,” she says. “Skepticism from Black people is well-founded. But I do hope that if you receive the devastating diagnosis of cancer, you’ll consider joining a trial.”

According to Dr. Baskin, clinical trial patients — who are actually “trying” a new drug or type of treatment before it’s available to everyone — not only receive access to potentially life-changing medicine, but also impact future treatment of other Black people.

“The drugs and treatments we use today are based on clinical trials mostly done on white patients,” she explains. “That disparity is based on the trust issues I mentioned earlier and social determinants of health. We need to correct that imbalance, but we can’t do it if Black people choose not to participate.”

Learn more about who should get cancer screenings, community and cancer support, and cancer research on the UPMC Hillman Cancer Center site. <https://hillmanresearch.upmc.edu/>

## Community “listening tours” will help UPMC Hillman end cancer health disparities

Different groups of people in this country have unequal health status. The inequality comes from a person’s race, gender, age, and financial condition. It’s also the result of education level, lack of health insurance, and access to healthcare facilities and providers.

Black Americans suffer from health disparities more than white Americans. These inequities take a toll on Black people’s physical and mental well-being. The stress can result in higher rates of preventable diseases, including cancer.

To prevent disparity, UPMC Hillman is steadfast in its mission to edu-

cate and create programs that give everyone access to healthier lives. That includes partnering with community-based organizations in underserved neighborhoods.

“The most important steps in making sure people have equal access to cancer care is to identify and understand what causes disparities, so we can work together to eliminate them,” says Dr. Monica L. Baskin, Associate Director of Community Outreach and Engagement and Associate Director for Health Equity at UPMC Hillman Cancer Center.

Dr. Baskin has spent her career studying behaviors related to cancer

prevention, detection, and treatment in underserved communities, including reducing racial and geographic inequities.

After more than 20 years of research in the Deep South — most recently at the University of Alabama at Birmingham — Dr. Baskin joined UPMC in 2022.

In her new role, Dr. Baskin is committed to giving everyone within the UPMC Hillman network equal access to the center’s high-quality cancer resources. That includes people who live in 29 counties in Western Pa., who need information, screening, and care.

“UPMC Hillman is mak-

ing life-changing discoveries in cancer prevention and treatment,” Dr. Baskin states. “We want everyone to benefit from them.”

To make sure that happens, Dr. Baskin is mindful of UPMC Hillman’s designation as a National Cancer Institute Comprehensive Cancer Center. “To honor that distinction, we promise to educate and care for everyone equally in our entire area — not just UPMC Hillman patients.”

One of Dr. Baskin’s first tasks is identifying, hiring, and training individuals who will serve as UPMC Hillman’s “boots on the ground” throughout the 29 counties.

She and her team will

also be searching for and contacting community leaders and elders — people the community values and respects — and listening to what they have to say.

“I’m calling them ‘listening tours,’ she explains. “Listening is important for understanding. Our goal is to meet with members of a community where they live and hear them tell us what UPMC Hillman is doing well and what we’re not doing well. It’s the best way to begin to understand and break down the barriers to cancer care that cause health disparities.”

## The Birmingham Free Clinic offers quality, compassionate healthcare

Founded in 1994, The Birmingham Free Clinic is located in Pittsburgh’s South Side. A service of the Program for Health Care to Underserved Populations (PHCUP), it is one of six clinics locally that provide care at no cost to patients. Birmingham is one of the longest-operating free clinics in Pennsylvania.

The clinic serves those who are chronically lacking health insurance, and particularly those community members who are historically excluded from traditional care access and significantly impacted by social determinants.

Staff and volunteers include physicians, pharmacists, nurses, physical and occupational therapists, health professional students, Certified Community Health Workers, AmeriCorps National Service Members, and other providers. It’s also supported by individual donations, student-led fundraising events, and UPMC’s Division of Internal Medicine.

The clinic offers primary, specialty, and preventive care, health education, and medications. They provide medical and social services and case management — and help patients deal with

services that require insurance.

The clinic’s goal is to give uninsured and medically underserved people uninterrupted, quality, and inclusive healthcare. That includes helping patients prevent illness and disease through education and empowerment.

Each week, the clinic offers the same kind of care you’d normally receive at a doctor’s office, such as healthcare maintenance, vaccines, and blood and urine tests.

Specialty clinics for heart, hearing, skin, eye, and more are also available. Other

services focus on children’s health, mental health, dental health, and quitting smoking, among others.

A long-time partner of UPMC Hillman Cancer Center, the clinic is able to offer breast and cervical cancer screenings to their patients at no charge. These are crucial preventive health screenings and follow-up that their patients might otherwise never receive. Through this partnership, the clinic was able to provide 60 mammograms, with 6 biopsies, as well as 50 cervical cancer screenings, with breast and cervical health education, for 127

unique patients in 2022!

Partnerships and support from flagship providers such as UPMC Hillman are critical to helping safety-net providers such as Birmingham mitigate health disparities and address social determinants and health justice for our fellow community members.

Learn more on the clinic’s website at [birmingham-freeclinic.wixsite.com](http://birmingham-freeclinic.wixsite.com), including Frequently Asked Questions, and learn more about other free clinics in our region at [www.freeclinicspa.org](http://www.freeclinicspa.org)