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News Release

Oct. 6, 2022

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UAMS College of Public Health Researcher to Study Barriers to Quitting Menthol Cigarettes Among African Americans

LITTLE ROCK — Dina M. Jones, Ph.D., MPH, assistant professor for the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health’s Center for the Study of Tobacco, received a \$733,000 K01 grant to conduct a study that seeks to understand disparities in smoking cessation among African American menthol cigarette smokers.

The K01, an esteemed career development award, is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse of the National Institutes of Health.

“It’s an honor to get this grant,” Jones said. “This is a huge opportunity. When you receive a K01, it means reviewers deem the proposed training plan and research project as being top notch and you receive intensive support to develop your career. Also, I’m the first person in the history of this college to get the award. I’m eager to research factors that predict smoking lapses in real-time among African American smokers.”

Funded in August 2022, the UQuit Study will be ongoing until 2027.

The project delves into why African American cigarette smokers – more than 85% of whom use menthol cigarettes — are less likely to quit smoking than white smokers and those who use non-menthol cigarettes.

Individuals in the study will reside in either Little Rock or North Little Rock and be 21 to 75 years old. Participants must be planning or willing to quit smoking within the next 30 days on a planned quit date and have regular access to a smartphone.

Jones is using word-of-mouth, social media, community events, the college’s website, and the tobacco center’s community partners to recruit African American menthol cigarette smokers for the study.

“African Americans who smoke cigarettes typically prefer menthol cigarettes. But that’s not by accident,” she said. “Research has shown that tobacco companies have used various forms of advertising, marketing and partnerships with leaders in the Black

community to intentionally push the use of menthol cigarettes into the Black community.”

Jones said the soothing, cooling taste, along with smoking being a means to cope with stress, are among the main reasons why many African American smokers continue to smoke menthol cigarettes.

Additionally, in comparison to non-menthol smokers — who are more likely to be white — African American menthol cigarette smokers have greater nicotine dependence despite typically smoking fewer cigarettes per day, which makes their lower quit rates even more puzzling.

The UQuit Study will follow participants before and after they try to quit smoking. Jones aims to assess how changes in a participant’s mood, nicotine cravings, stress levels, as well as exposure to stressors like discrimination and tobacco advertising influence the likelihood of relapsing.

Jones’ goal is to use data from the UQuit Study to create interventions that increase successful smoking cessation among African American menthol cigarette smokers. A larger goal of Jones’ work is to eliminate tobacco-related health disparities given that African Americans have disproportionately high rates of tobacco-caused morbidity and death, including cancer, compared to white smokers.

A key element to that goal is surveying people who can successfully stop smoking menthol cigarettes.

“Most African Americans are unaware that menthol cigarettes are harder to quit than non-menthol cigarettes and many prefer to quit on their own without any assistance or quit aids,” Jones said. “If we get people in the study who can successfully quit and compare their traits, their daily circumstances, and how they manage life once they quit, to those who relapse, it may help our research immensely.”

UAMS is the state's only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; a hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS' clinical enterprise. UAMS is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 3,047 students, 873 medical residents and fellows, and six dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with more than 11,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children's, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com . Find us on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram.