

# Baby Love

## Tonya Lewis Lee Talks Infant Mortality

by chandra r. thomas

**A**s if it weren't already long enough, attorney, author, producer and mother Tonya Lewis Lee can now add community health advocate to her list of accolades. The wife of famed filmmaker Spike Lee is the face of "A Healthy Baby Begins With You," a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health campaign aimed at raising awareness about alarming black infant mortality rates. Lee is traveling to historically black colleges and universities across the country in hopes that educating African-American women about prenatal care, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and preconception health can help make a difference.

### ● How did you get involved?

The Office of Minority Health came to me two years ago and said that there is a crisis going on in the African-American community. Our babies are dying at a rate of three and four times the rate of white babies. I had no idea that this was going on. Once I realized the severity of the issue, I knew I had to get involved.

### ● What surprised you most after you got educated on the topic?

This is not an issue of poverty; this problem impacts African-American women from every socio-economic class. No matter the educational or financial situation, we're all at risk.

### ● What are some of the main factors contributing to the problem?



That's just it: We don't know. Part of my mission is to get funding for more research related to low-birth weight and infant mortality in our community. We do know stress is a big factor. It's stressful being a black woman in this country. We have to figure out ways to better manage our stress.

### ● What do you want most to get out of this campaign?

While we do have to hold our government, doctors and the overall community accountable, we also need to hold ourselves accountable by taking better care of ourselves. The good news is there are steps that can be taken to prevent this. We need to improve our diet and get regular exercise. We also need to plan our pregnancies as much as possible. Spacing out your children two years apart can help, too. Research has shown doing that tends to help with having

healthier babies. Preconception health is also a major factor that often gets overlooked. You should be taking folic acid before you get pregnant.

### ● What do you want most for the black community to take away from this campaign?

The message is be healthy. We are all so valuable and we need to be mindful of how we treat ourselves. I know it's so cliché, but our children are extremely valuable, and we need everyone in our community to be as strong and healthy as possible. Everything starts with your health.

For more information on this campaign, visit [omhrc.gov](http://omhrc.gov). ♥

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