Racism is the systematic oppression of people of color.

Some racist incidents are conscious and intentional, but racism often operates unconsciously.

In health care, unconscious bias might affect a provider’s line of questioning and lead to misdiagnosis. Or, it can affect body language and other subtle cues that cause patients to lose trust, withhold information or fail to follow medical advice.

People of color, and especially Black people, experience negative health outcomes, in part due to the stress of discrimination, including discrimination in health care settings.

Discrimination in health care

In a survey of 231 mothers, 40% reported communication issues during prenatal care and 24% perceived discrimination during birth hospitalization.

The Likelihood of reporting discrimination due to race, language, or culture was three times higher among Black or Hispanic women.

Focus group participants described disrespect during healthcare encounters, including experiences of racism and discrimination; stressful interactions with all levels of staff; unmet information needs; and inconsistent social support.
Discrimination and Prenatal Care
Black women face the greatest risk of maternal morbidity and mortality and are also more likely to enter prenatal care late.  

Racism is a barrier to accessing care and influences the attitudes, beliefs, and confidence in which African American women approach or accept prenatal care. Moreover, how they are treated in the clinical setting can affect the decision to return or adhere to care.

One study found that women from minority ethnic groups did not feel involved in decisions, which led them to lack confidence and trust in their provider.

Discrimination, Stress, and Preterm Birth
Racism is a chronic stressor: One study showed that the average scale increase in reported experiences of discrimination in the past year was associated with a decline in self-rated physical health and mental health.

Chronic stress is a known risk factor for preterm birth. Feeling upset by experiences of racism was significantly associated with greater odds of preterm birth.

Feeling upset by experiences of racism was significantly associated with greater odds of preterm birth. Findings suggest that, for non-Hispanic Black women, the emotional effect of experiences of racism may contribute to the risk of preterm birth.

References: