

[Kaleia] I was getting an MRI done because I was having pain in my hip. And the doctor came in, and he's like, "So we don't see anything like in your hip area, but we're wondering if maybe your fibroid is pressing up against a nerve and that's why you're having pain." And I was like, "What are you talking about?" He shows the X ray. He's like, "You have a fibroid the size of a lemon!"

[Jenna] Maybe an orange.

[Aya] Grapefruit-sized.

[Lola] Watermelon-sized? It's pushing on my spine, and it's — my organs are running out of room and all kinds of weird stuff.

[Elle] In an effort to become a mother, learning that I was already pregnant with this mass of cells that was just eating my body to keep itself alive.

[Simone] The technician might as well have just told me I had a baby, because that would also have been just as surprising. They were like, oh, it's measuring like that of a six-month-pregnant person.

[Vaness] Five months.

[c.r.] Six months pregnant.

[Kaiji] They said it's about nine centimeters, where it's actually above my stomach and all the way down to my pelvis.

[Jenna] On my right ovary. Three on my right and then one on my left.

[Vaness] There's over twenty.

[Je'Kendria] There were so many that they didn't even count. She was like, your uterus is twice the size of a normal uterus.

[Ellis] Two of them were twice the size of my uterus. The size made perfect sense to the pain that I was feeling, how sick I was getting, how nothing was working.

[Kaleia] Fibroids was something that was not on my radar at all.

[Lola] I literally majored in women and gender studies, and I never heard this word until my doctor diagnosed me.

[Skyler] I had to first Google what a fibroid actually was,

[Simone] And I looked at the pictures, and I was like, I'm going to throw up. Like, why did I do that?

[Kaiji] My mind was blown. I'm like, This is what they look like?

[Simone] This was not part of like, the your body is changing talk.

[c.r.] I remember hearing about it. But you know, in the laundry list of like, "As a Black fem-embodied person ,you might be at risk for... and then keep it pushing."

[Charmaine] There seems to be this cultural joke like, "Welcome to the club."

[Kaiji] It was just something that was inevitable. They've always run in my family. I just knew that I would wait my turn to get my diagnosis.

[Charmaine] When I was 13, I witnessed my mother in a hemorrhagic episode that was caused by fibroids, and it led to an emergency hysterectomy. I was quite young. I had just begun menstruating and to see her lying in blood and being carried out of the house and then having to support her as she convalesced at my grandmother's for three months, which was an entire summer... it was terrifying. And I wondered if my body could do what her body was doing. I think I made a decision at that time that I was going to do whatever I could to make sure that didn't happen to me, and I thought that was going to save me, and none of what I was doing saved me.

[Je'Kendria] It took over my entire life.

[Kaiji] I was just in complete agony every day,

[Je'Kendria] Sick in ways that I couldn't explain.

[Vaness] Very fatigued and weak, and it takes a lot of energy for me to even leave this house.

[Skyler] I always have lower back pain,

[Je'Kendria] back pain,

[Kaleia] physical pain in my stomach every day,

[Kaiji] Feeling the fibroid press against your bladder, your bowels.

[Vaness] I can still feel one like protruding through my stomach,

[Jenna] the heavy periods,

[Je’Kendria] Abdominal cramps, migraines

[mick] seven days, usually eight day cycles.

[Kaleia] A forty-two-day cycle,

[mick] heavy bleeding,

[Je’Kendria] bleeding so much that I thought I had a miscarriage,

[mick] occasional vomiting,

[Je’Kendria] vomiting uncontrollably for like 12 to 15 hours, sometimes even longer. It started to happen so often, where I was like, I think I might die like, this might actually take me out. I don't know.

[Jenna] Sometimes it would knock me out cold.

[Ellis] In so much pain that I had to pull over off the highway. Made it just in time before I passed out. Tried to put the car in park, but actually ended up in reverse. I remember hearing like horns going. I woke up, and I couldn't see. Everything was grayed out, and I had an incredible fever.

[Je’Kendria] Just out and about in the world, still dealing with this. Having to go to the bathroom every two hours, to change.

[Kaleia] Every night, I was waking up to go to the bathroom without fail, and it never dawned on me that I didn't always do that.

[c.r.] I thought someone was stabbing me in the night. I literally cannot move my legs like I used to.

[Skyler]I just felt like I couldn't move.

[Kaiji] This is terrifying to know that these masses just started growing in your body for no reason, and nobody knows why.

[Je’Kendria] Like, what the fuck is that about?

[Elle] Looking at the statistics, I'm like — oh, this is really bad, and no one can explain why?

[Vaness] The doctors, they're like, “You know, there's very little research and....” That's not helpful.

[Je-Shawna] That sounds very bizarre. It's common in like, a large population, but... you don't... have no research about it?

[Elle] I understand why there's so little research. It's race. It's misogyny. It's so many things, and I'm still like... what?

[Kaiji] That's not what I want to hear. I want to know why it's happening.

[Vaness] I'm paying this money for these doctors. Y'all need to give me all the answers. I want to know how people get these. Why is it more prevalent in Black women? Once they're removed, why do they continue to grow? Why?

[Elle] I don't think there's anything wrong with speculation. It's my body. I can speculate all I want to.

[Kaleia] The hotep don't be all the way wrong. And so it makes me wonder, as a kid who grew up getting relaxers...

[Lola] My mother started relaxing my hair when I was like four. Maybe the exposure to those chemicals probably had a lot to do with it, because there's been a lot of weird reproductive things that they found out those chemicals are causing.

[Jenna] Why is *They Cloned Tyrone* in the humor section in Netflix? Like, that shit is a documentary.

[Je'Kendria] Maybe it is because I used to have perms.

[Simone]] I only had a perm once, like, I got it applied once, and my parents were like, oh, we can't afford to upkeep this.

[Kaiji] I happened to get one when I was, like, 11, and then I didn't have any more after that. And I've had locs or natural hair. It's more than that.

[Simone] There is environmental racism. I grew up around like a oil refinery.

[Je-Shawna] I think the foods, maybe that we eat?

[Skyler] It's the way I eat and my food. We got to get fresh produce, we have to go 45 minutes or 30 minutes from our neighborhoods if we want it like that, or we gotta pay an arm and a leg from these people.

[Kaleia] I was plant-based. I was working out four or five times a week. Like that was actually the healthiest I had ever been in my adulthood.

[Vaness] Is it because I'm not having sex with men or some— I don't know, like, it's, is penetration a part of it? I know that's crazy. That sound crazy, but I'm like, does that factor in? Or I don't. I don't know.

[Kaiji] It's nothing that somebody did wrong. It's not something that I purposely went out to try to get fibroids, like it just kind of happened, but it's that stigma of you obviously aren't taking care of yourself, or you're not eating right. This is nothing that somebody is causing. It's just a lot of uncharted territory. I really feel like it's epigenetics.

[Kaleia] I believe in epigenetics, and the fact that we pass trauma through our genes,

[Je'Kendria] It's kind of in our DNA, and it's being passed down

[Kaiji] Definitely, like trauma being passed down until that trauma is resolved. It kind of eats them up on the inside, like, literally,

[Je'Kendria] I absolutely felt that it was ancestral, and I blame J Marion Sims, considered

the father of modern gynecology. Sims was a white southern doctor who experimented on enslaved black women without anesthesia or informed consent.

[Je'Kendria] My body has been revolting against centuries of systemic violence,

[Kaiji] The stresses of being a black woman in America, or things that we've endured, impacting our whole body.

[Vaness] For most of my life, I've been in cities. They've been expensive, and I've been around a lot of black women who are, like, just making it by.

[Aya] When I interviewed my mom, she said that in her day, they called fibroids, the working woman's disease. The women who got them were the women who had three jobs, who worked double shifts, who just like, never sat down, who had four or five kids, and, you know, taking care of their parents too. It was common and accepted and not something that you got any special allowances for.

[Skyler] We got more stress than white women and us being black women, we don't really talk about it. We don't feel that. We get hurt, so we hold it all in. So maybe that's why, because, you know, white women, they cry, when they cry, they get help. We don't, you know, we get help, but we don't get the comfort. We get talked to like we animals are saying, come here. You can do it. Versus white women, okay, Becky, you know.

[Kaiji] And we know statistically, when black people are silenced or they suppress their emotions, autoimmune diseases start

[elle] Grief and anger held in the body the ways that we are conditioned to repress our true feelings, it's just stuck inside of us.

[c.r.] I was seeing a Chinese medicine doctor. When the fibroids started growing, I could tell she was concerned. It was a very physical presence, and she had asked me, which I thought was a very strange question, and it wasn't a language barrier. She's like, What do you think this is? I started having dreams of it being a head, and was very clear it was fucking angry, and I don't have the resources to fight it. And she normally would not recommend surgery or anything that. She's like, I actually think that this needs to leave, Even in the spiritual sense, you know, sometimes things need cutting. I told my surgeon I wanted pictures, that I wanted to see this being. I'm birthing it, so I want to see who it is. And I didn't tell her I thought it looked like a head or anything. I was just like, I just want to see what this looks like. And then when she sent me the imaging, she's like, this looks like a head, and it looks angry. And I'm like, thank you.

What is this? What's what's happening here? And I don't think this is just happening to my body. I feel like it's some kind of technology, and I'm not sure for what? From when? But I don't necessarily come from a belief that illness is illness. It's a message, I think, in through conversation and story, the message will become clear.

[Aya] I did my thesis for yoga school on fibroids and on using yoga to heal the rage that I had believed by then was the real emotional root cause. I remember being such a fireball, and other people noticing all the time. As I got older, it just felt less and less acceptable to be mad, and then the Mad black woman narrative was bothersome, and, you know, I didn't want to be that. So then it got to a place where I'd only expressed anger when I was alone. Sometimes I would scream in the car. I would break things at home, or I had this habit of kicking things, and sometimes I would hurt myself because there just felt like there was nothing acceptable to do with anger. I started to think that my body was cleaning up. It was gathering up the dross, the DIS ease, the muck, you know, the stuff, packaging it up for me and storing it over here.

[Simone] Here, let me form these little benign pockets of what muscle. When you think about like muscle and like action and rigidity,

[Aya] I would be most enraged by injustice.

[Kaleia] This country is fucked up.

[Charmaine] It's scary. It's scary out here,

[elle] I can never make peace with that, and I also can't hold that revolt, that refusal, inside of my body. It might have become a fibroid that I didn't realize that I had inside of my uterus.

[Vaness] I'm not gonna let that shit sit and fester. I have to say something like, I'm pissed off. I'm pissed off about this, pissed off about the fibroids, about what's happening in the world. I gotta talk about it.

[c.r.] I didn't know how tired I would get from speaking my truth, my anger, over time, got more repressed because I just got weathered, even just moving through the healthcare situation, you know, like I'm exhausted by how much denial of reality there is

[Kaleia] On top of navigating just the actual reality of having something in your body that's hurting you and causing you harm, having to navigate a healthcare industry that doesn't care about you, the health insurance industry that really doesn't give a damn about you. It was so much emotionally.

[Ellis] I was advised to go to hospital. But you know, there's this fear of going.

[Kaiji] I mean, you hear about it all the time, like especially black women. You go to the doctor, your pain is not being taken seriously, and then the next thing you know, you've died for something minor

[Jenna] Before I'm making an appointment, I'm doing my Reiki. I got my tea with me. I have my support, like I got my oils, like I'm in deep prayer.

[Je'Kendria] I will suffer for a while before it's time for me to really go and see someone. And I went, and it was a black woman gynecologist. She literally told me to lose weight.

[Kaleia] When I told her about my stomach pain, my irregular periods, she told me that it was because I was overweight. Literally berated me in the session. She's like you were an athlete. What happened to you? And I had just had a foot surgery, so I hadn't walked in three months.

[Je-Shawna] They said two weeks before your period, start taking a leave daily. So you want me to pump my body with drugs every day? That's three weeks out of a four week month. That can't be good.

[Je'Kendria] She said you should take the maximum amount of Tylenol every day. I was like, I need an ultrasound. I know that the fibroids are back, and I had to really push for that, because she was just like, No, let's get you on birth control.

[Kaleia] Her diagnosis, without asking any questions, was I had a rare gastrointestinal issue because I smoked weed,

[Jenna] Even checking for the fibroids, being in excruciating discomfort while it was happening, just like, I'm not gonna tell you shit. You're just gonna lay here and I'm asking all these questions and feeling the frustration of like you are wasting my time. I shouldn't feel rushed every time I go to a gynecologist. It shouldn't have taken me 20 years to get a diagnosis for fibroids.

[Kaleia] I'm going to multiple professionals and explaining in detail the things that are happening to me, and no one considered that it could have been a fibroid?

[Charmaine] Black, queer and trans people. So many of us don't have access to quality and affordable health care, you know, to one even be diagnosed, and then also to, you know, to then have the proper treatment and care.

[Jenna] They don't see black people as real people. They don't see trans people as real people. There, of course, are people in the in the industry who understand the intersectionalities of it all, and you know, you can get an appointment with them in like 10 months.

[mick] My providers have all been white women. There's certainly a way that they're interacting that is infantilizing.

[Charmaine] I mostly had white doctors, and it just didn't seem like a big deal to them.

[Kaiji] I wasn't taken seriously. They were kind of cavalier, like, well, it's just fibroids. Having to repeat myself when a question comes up, are you and your husband? And I'm like, are you listening to me? Are you reading my file?

[mick] When I disclose that I'm queer, that I'm not interested in having kids, that my partners and I are not interested in pursuing that the whole well that could change

[Taylor] Attempts to preserve my ability to give birth rather than help me stop pain.

[c.r.] People were like, you have to agree to hysterectomy. Immediately. I was like, wait, I know that's not the first step. Something's wrong about that line of thinking. It took about a year before I found a doctor who was willing to do imaging, and so in that year time, it grew

[Kaiji] Both my mom and my aunt, they had full hysterectomies that was kind of devastating for them, because they both did want other children. As far as I remember, the doctors just told them there wasn't any way around it, and we don't know if that's actually true or not.

[elle] I was going in for a myomectomy, and might have had to have a hysterectomy, and had to just consent to those risks before I went under. I didn't know whether I was gonna wake up with a uterus or not.

[Je'Kendria] The hysterectomy was fine, you know, the wheeled me out, but there was literally no follow up, care, no package to be like, All right, this is your life. Now. I was like, do I need to get a pap smear anymore? Like, I don't, I don't know anything.

[c.r.] They don't tell you shit. Bye! Oh, you can walk? You just passed some gas? All right. Bye!

[Je'Kendria] Damn. Y'all not go give us, like a care package, or like a follow up, it's just boop, you're out on your own. And of course, they gave me a bill.

[Kaleia] My level of care was enough to make me, I wouldn't say, suicidal, but it made me literally want to just opt out, like I would just wish that I would not wake up.

[Charmaine] I feel like I'm too tired to feel rage, like I feel rage, but I'm too tired to like express it. And I don't know if it's because I almost kind of feel like it would consume me

[Je'Kendria] If I get too stressed, or even if I get too angry, then I just start to like spiral.

[elle] I immediately cry. I go from screaming to crying,

[Kaiji] you find yourself being explosive.

[Jenna] It would end up in like blackout situations, and I'm behind bars, and that shit was scary.

[Ellis] I've seen anger show up in scary ways.

[elle] I've been afraid of it. I've been afraid of my own anger. I've been afraid of other people's

[Charmaine] I also don't know where to direct it. I used to direct my anger a lot at my past partner.

[c.r.] I grew up in a domestic violence home, and so there really wasn't expressions of healthy anger. Anger and violence are intertwined and over coupled.

[elle] I've allowed anger to get this really bad rep. I grew up a middle class girl child taking up as little space as possible,

[mick] raised as the eldest child, raised as an eldest daughter, I was taught to sort of hold it together.

[Je'Kendria] I find myself being more angry on behalf of other people.

[c.r.] Even when I was younger, I used to get into fight, but not necessarily to protect myself.

[Kaleia] As a kid who grew up fighting mostly boys, I learned that if I reacted while angry, I would not be respected or listened to. Anger was not allowed. I would stomp it out.

[c.r.] My wife makes fun of me, but I was like, I'm really envious of white men and their ability to just, like, tear shit up. I actually it was like a head banger, and being in mosh pits were freaking great to, like, just do that, and that was just fine, and what we were doing was communal, and there was no words. I didn't have to really go into all the things.

[elle] When I feel most angry, I feel ignored or I feel like I'm being misunderstood, Part of my somatic journey has been staying grounded and present with myself

[Je'Kendria] like let me pause and not dissociate,

[elle] even as anger is starting to bubble up to let myself cry and then also say the hard thing

[Je'Kendria] you have to say, what you need

[elle] to, whoever I need to say it to, and that includes myself.

[c.r.] In Buddhism, you know, the flip side of anger is wisdom. There's an injustice being spoken to,

[elle] because this is not how things should be.

[c.r.] I have a line. Everyone has a line.

[Kaleia] I am still mad. It makes me irate, really, to think about the lack of care, lack of attention that I experienced. There's something systematically wrong. You have to maintain your anger like a fire. Your anger is what fuels you into action. So you don't want to let it go out, because that means you've probably hit apathy. You're probably giving up. But you don't want your anger, your fire, to burn so much that you burn out.

[Aya] Emotions are energetic. I understand now everything is energetic before it's physical, and it's all just so connected. It's something that's sometimes hard to talk about, but you have this felt sense of this truth.

[Kaiji] Your body will let you know if something's wrong. You don't have to live a life that's full of pain.

[June Jordan] I am not wrong. Wrong is not my name. My name is my own, my own, my own. And I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this, but I can tell you that from now on, my resistance, my simple and daily and nightly self-determination may very well cost you your life.