

Why Your Family Health History Matters

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Your family health history is important to your health. Besides similar looks and lifestyle habits, genes play an important role in your risk of developing certain health conditions, such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, or cancer. Having a picture of your family's medical history is a good thing when it comes to proactively managing your health.

According to the United States Surgeon General, however, very few people are likely to have detailed and precise information about their family members and their health histories. Though having little information about your family health history is better than having none, a detailed health history can have important information for you, your children, and your health care team.

What Is Your Family Medical History?

Family health history simply refers to health and medical information about you and your close relatives. Knowledge of your family's medical history is important for your health because it can help you and your health care providers identify whether you are at higher risk for certain health conditions, or even recommend ways to help lower your risk or screen for them.

Even though you cannot change your genetic makeup, knowing your risk factors for various diseases can be your cue to speak to your health care providers and to get health screenings on a more regular basis. For example, over 34 million adults in the U.S. have diabetes, and 1 in 5 of them don't know they have it. Healthcare providers can keep tabs on a person's blood sugar during regular checkups. Or regular breast exams may be recommended if an individual has a close relative with a history of breast cancer.

Does It Run in the Family?

A good way to learn about your family health history is to talk to family members and ask questions. It can be helpful to discuss the topic when several relatives are gathered together. Often, family get-togethers, or holidays, such as Thanksgiving, can be a good time to ask questions about your family's medical history (while staying Covid-19-safe, of course).

Some questions you may ask can include:

- Are there any chronic conditions (such as heart disease or diabetes) that run in the family that I should know about? Any close relatives with a history of chronic disease such as cancer, heart disease, or diabetes?
- Did any of our close relatives get diagnosed with a disease at young age? How old were they when diagnosed?
- Do we have family health history information that I can share with my doctor?
- What else should we know about our family health history?

Your Family Health Tree

There are several ways to organize your family health history so that you can share it with your relatives or doctor. For example, draw your family tree and record the names of your close relatives from both sides, and include conditions each family member has or had, and the age at which they were first diagnosed.

Another way to record your family health history is to use an Internet-based tool created by The Surgeon General, called "**My Family Health Portrait**". This free tool can help you assemble your family information and create a health-history report that only you can access. The site is private, and does not record, keep, or share your personal or family information. When complete, you simply download a document of your family health history that you can share with whomever you choose.

The format you use isn't as important as gathering the health history information and sharing it with relatives and your health care team. Be sure to update it on a regular basis.

Sources:

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