

Family History is Important for Your Health

Most of us know that we can reduce our risk of disease by eating a healthy diet, getting enough exercise, and not smoking. But did you know that your family history might be one of the strongest influences on your risk of developing heart disease, stroke, diabetes, or cancer? Even though you cannot change your genetic makeup, knowing your family history can help you reduce your risk of developing health problems.



Family History and Your Risk of Disease

Family members share their genes, as well as their environment, lifestyles and habits. Everyone can recognize traits that run in their family, such as curly hair, dimples, leanness or athletic ability. Risks for diseases such as asthma, diabetes, cancer, and heart disease also run in families.

Everyone's family history of disease is different. The key features of a family history that may increase risk are

- Diseases that occur at an earlier age than expected (10 to 20 years before most people get the disease);
- Disease in more than one close relative;
- Disease that does not usually affect a certain gender (for example, breast cancer in a male);
- Certain combinations of diseases within a family (for example, breast and ovarian cancer, or heart disease and diabetes).

If your family has one or more of these features, your family history may hold important clues about your risk for disease.

Using Family History to Promote Your Health

People with a family history of disease may have the most to gain from lifestyle changes and screening tests.

You can't change your genes, but you can change unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, inactivity, and poor eating habits. In many cases, adopting a healthier lifestyle can reduce your risk for diseases that run in your family.

Screening tests (such as mammograms and colorectal cancer screening) can detect diseases like cancers at an early stage when they are most treatable. Screening tests can also detect disease risk factors like high cholesterol and high blood pressure, which can be treated to reduce the chances of getting disease.

Learning About Your Family History

To learn about your family history:

- ask questions,
- talk at family gatherings, and
- look at death certificates and family medical records, if possible.

Collect information about your grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, siblings, and children. The type of information to collect includes

- major medical conditions and causes of death,
- age of disease onset and age at death, and
- ethnic background

Write down the information and share it with your doctor. Your doctor will

- assess your disease risk based on your family history and other risk factors,
- recommend lifestyle changes to help prevent disease, and
- prescribe screening tests to detect disease early.

If your doctor notices a pattern of disease in your family, it may be a sign of an inherited form of disease that is passed on from generation to generation. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist who can help determine whether you have an inherited form of disease. Genetic testing may also help determine if you or your family members are at risk. Even with inherited forms of disease, steps can be taken to reduce your risk.

What If You Have No Family History?

Even if you don't have a history of a particular health problem in your family, you could still be at risk. This is because

- your lifestyle, personal medical history, and other factors influence your chances of getting a disease;
- you may be unaware of disease in some family members;
- you could have family members who died young, before they had a chance to develop chronic conditions such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, or cancer.

Being aware of your family health history is an important part of a lifelong wellness plan.

Where You Can Find More Information

The following Web sites provide additional information on family history:

- CDC's Family History Web site for the Public — www.cdc.gov/genomics/famhistory/famhist.htm
- U.S. Surgeon General's Family History Initiative — www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/
- National Society for Genetic Counselors — www.nsgc.org/consumer/familytree/

For more information on CDC's National Office of Public Health Genomics, visit our Web site at www.cdc.gov/genomics.

