



# Frequently Asked Questions About Family Health History

## What is family health history?

Family health history refers to information about diseases and health conditions that affect you and your close blood relatives. Family health history is one of the most important risk factors for diseases like cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. (A risk factor is anything that increases your chance of getting a disease.) Family health information can be collected and recorded to help determine your risk of developing certain diseases.

## Why is knowing my family health history important?

Family members share their genes and their environment, and sometimes their lifestyles and habits. A family health history helps determine if you are at increased risk of disease because it reflects your genes and these other shared risk factors. Knowing your family health history can help your doctor or other health professional predict your risk of developing diseases and help you make changes to reduce your risk.

## How can knowing my family health history help lower my risk of disease?

You can't change your genes, but you can change behaviors that affect your health, such as smoking, being inactive, and having poor eating habits. If you have a personal or family history of chronic disease, you may have the most to gain from making lifestyle changes. In many cases, making healthy changes can reduce your risk of becoming ill even if you have already had the disease or if the disease runs in your family.

Another change you can make is to get screening tests, such as mammograms and colorectal cancer screening, for early detection of disease. Screening tests can also detect risk factors like high cholesterol and blood pressure, which can be treated to reduce your chances of developing other health problems. If you have a family history of a chronic disease, you may benefit from screening tests that look for risk factors or early signs of disease. Finding disease early, before symptoms appear, can mean better health for you in the long run. If you are uncertain about where to obtain screening tests, contact your local health department.

## What aspects of family health history affect my risk of disease?

Everyone's family health history is different. The key features of a family health history that increase your risk are:

- Diseases that occur at an earlier age than expected (10-20 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 cancers, or heart disease and diabetes).

If your family has one or more of these features, then your family health history is an important risk factor for disease.

Sometimes, a pattern of disease in a family may be a sign of a disease that is passed on from generation to generation. In these families, the risk of disease may be very high and disease may occur at young ages. A specialist trained in genetics can help you determine whether someone in your family has an inherited form of disease. Genetic testing may also help find out which family members are at risk. These family members can get screening tests and take steps to reduce their risk.

## If I don't have a family health history of disease, does that mean I am not at risk?

Even if you don't have a history of a certain disease in your family, you could still be at risk for the following reasons:

- Your lifestyle, personal health history, and other factors also effect your chances of getting a disease.
- Your family could have a history of disease that you don't know about.
- Your family members may have died young, before they had a chance to develop chronic diseases.

## My mother had breast cancer. Does this mean I will get cancer, too?

Having a family member with a disease, means that you may have a higher chance of developing that disease than someone without a similar family health history. It does not mean that you will develop the disease for sure. Genes are one of many factors that contribute to disease. Other factors to consider include lifestyle habits, such as diet and physical activity.

If you are at risk of breast cancer, consider following recommendations for a healthy diet and regular exercise. It is also important to talk to your health professional about your risk and to follow recommendations for screening tests (such as mammograms) that may help to detect disease early, when it is most treatable.

## Because both of my parents had heart disease, I know I have "bad" genes. Is there anything I can do to protect myself?

First of all, there are no "good" or "bad" genes. Most human diseases, especially common diseases such as heart disease, result from a combination of your genes, your environment, and the lifestyle choices you make. The way to prevent disease for anyone, regardless of family health history, is to get regular physical activity, have a healthy diet, and avoid smoking.

## How can I learn about my family health history?

The best way to learn about your family health history is to talk to your family. Ask questions, catch up at family gatherings, draw a family tree, and record health information. If possible, look at death certificates and family medical records to confirm the information you have collected.

## What information should I collect and record in my health family tree?

The type of information to collect includes:

- Major medical conditions and causes of death.
- Age when the family member got the disease and age at death.
- Ethnic background; African American or Hispanic people, for example, are at higher risk of some diseases.
- General lifestyle information like heavy drinking and smoking.

## Who are the most important relatives to include in my family health history?

Collect information about you, your children, siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and nieces and nephews.

## Is there something I can use to help me collect my family health history ?

Yes, the U.S. Surgeon General's Office has created a free, web-based tool called "My Family Health Portrait." The tool is available in both English and Spanish and can be accessed at <http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory>. Although the tool is web-based, all personal information is stored on your computer. No information is recorded or stored anywhere else. The tool works by guiding you through steps on how to collect and enter family health history information. It then generates a report that you can print with your family health history and a drawing of your family tree.

To access the web-based tool, follow the instructions at this website:

- English: <http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory>  
—A Spanish version is also available on this website.

If you want a paper copy of the tool, print out the form found at this website:

- English: <http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/downloads/portraitEng.pdf>

If you do not have access to a computer, you can order a copy of the form by calling 1-888-Ask HRSA (275-4772). Ask for "My Family Health Portrait" in English (inventory # HRS00360) or Spanish (inventory # HRS00361).

## What if I am adopted and can't find information about my family health history?

Some people can't find out the health history of every member of their family, so there may be blank areas. If you are adopted, the challenge may also include accessing family medical information from birth parents. The National Adoption Clearinghouse is a resource that may help with this process. It offers information about searching for birth parents at this website:

<http://naic.acf.hhs.gov/adopted/search/index.cfm>.

## What should I do with the family health information that I collect?

After you collect and record the information about your family health history, you should share it with your health professional. Remember to keep your information updated, share it with your siblings, and pass it on to your children so that they too will have a family health history record.

## What will my doctor or health professional do with the information?

Your health professional will assess your risk of disease based on your family health history and other risk factors. Your health professional may also recommend things you can do to help prevent disease, such as exercising more, changing your diet, or using screening tests to detect disease early.

## Could information shared with my doctor or other health professional be used to discriminate against me?

The family health information you share with your doctor or other health professional will be treated like any other health information in your medical chart. There are laws that protect the privacy of medical records.

To learn more about your right to health information privacy, visit this website:

[http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/hipaa/consumer\\_summary.pdf](http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/hipaa/consumer_summary.pdf)

## Where can I find more information about family health history?

The following websites provide more information on family health history:

- The U.S. Surgeon General's Family History Initiative  
<http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory>
- CDC's Family History Website for the Public  
<http://www.cdc.gov/genomics/public/famhist.htm>

