A Guide to Family Health History

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Does it Run in the Family?
This toolkit will help you collect, organize, and understand your family health history. In “Book 1: A Guide to Family Health History”, each section includes choices of activities. Choose the activity that works best for you.

Introduction

Collect
Information to collect
How to collect
How to ask questions
Sample questions

Organize
How to organize
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Understand
What now?
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Read “Book 2: A Guide to Genetics and Health” to learn more:
1. Why is genetics important to my family and me?
2. Which diseases might run in my family?
What is family health history?

Family health history is information about diseases that run in your family, as well as the eating habits, activities, and environments that your family shares. Knowing about the diseases that run in your family can help you make healthy choices.

Your family’s health is one part of the history of your family. While collecting your family health history, pay attention to events, stories, and experiences as well. Gathering your family history helps you share your family stories and health information with your family members and children.

Knowledge is power. Finding out the illnesses that run in our families can be just the motivation we need to start making healthier choices and save lives. It is never too late to care.

Barbara E. Jackson, RN
President/Founder
CATALYST
How can family health history affect my health?

You inherit many things from your parents and grandparents. They pass on culture and values through photos, recipes, stories, spiritual practices, and music. You also inherit how you look—for example, how tall you are and the color of your eyes. Small structures in cells called genes carry information for these characteristics and how your body works. Your genes were passed on to you from your parents.

Diana's Story

It was a wonderful opportunity to talk with my mom and get as much of our family health history from her before it is too late! Also, it served to make me understand: How little I remembered about my grandparents, aunts and uncles; That there seems to be a strong history of high blood pressure and stroke – granted all at a later age (i.e., 60 and older).... But that is close to my current age...
Some genes can make it more likely that you will get certain diseases. When members of your family share health problems, you might be at risk for getting the same health problems in the future. This is because family members can have genes, lifestyle, and environment in common. However, you may be able to prevent illness by knowing your family health history and by making healthy choices.

... so somewhat sobering. This has renewed my commitment to daily exercise and trying to eat well, and to enjoy life with family and friends. I am next going to send a copy of this document to my sister and brother and encourage them to complete it for their spouses and children.
How can my choices affect my health?

Many things shape your health. Some things—such as your genes—are outside of your control. Other things—such as what you eat, if you smoke or exercise, and what you do for a living—can be influenced by the choices you make. To make healthy choices, you need to understand your current health, your risk for getting certain diseases, and your environment.

Anne's Story

I have a small family, and although some things run in my family so far it is only hypertension that has affected my sisters and parents. It was fun to have a memory of the uncles and grandparents who have passed as well as my father. I was surprised that obesity was not a drop down on the list of conditions. I know one could write it in, but still....It's hard to know what to write because most of my relatives gain and lose weight a few times.
Talk to your family today!
It is amazing how many interesting and useful stories you will hear.

The one thing I want to do is drop the pounds I put on this summer, and seeing my BMI a bit above 25 has strengthened my resolve to make it to all my exercise classes. I have 4 scheduled per week (2 water aerobic, 1 Pilates, and 1 Zumba). I will have to go to a new student orientation tomorrow all sweaty from Pilates, but I will set a good example by doing so.
What information should I collect?

Who to collect information on:
- Yourself
- Your parents
- Your brothers and sisters
- Your children
- Your aunts and uncles

Basic information to collect:
- Name and how you are related (myself, parent, child, etc.)
- Ethnicity, race, and/or origins of family
- Date of birth (or your best guess—for example “1940s”)
- Place of birth
- If deceased, age and cause of death

Collect stories about your ancestry and culture. This is a great chance to preserve your family’s memories.

You don’t have to collect everything!
Who to collect info from
Collect the medical and health information on:
Yourself
Your brothers and sisters
Your children
Your parents
Then go back a generation at a time and include:
Grandparents
Aunts and Uncles
Cousins
Nieces and nephews

Basic info to collect
• Name and relationship to you (myself, parent, child, etc.)
• Race, ethnicity and/or origins of family
• Date of birth (or if the information is unavailable, write your best guess—for example “1940’s”)
• Place of birth

If deceased, age and cause of death

It is important to learn what you can.

Health history:
• Alzheimer’s disease
• Asthma and allergies
• Birth defects (such as cleft lip, heart defects, spina bifida)
• Blindness/vision loss
• Cancer (such as breast, ovarian, colon, prostate)
• Current and past medications
• Deafness/hearing loss at a young age
• Developmental delay/learning disorders
• Diabetes/sugar disease
• Heart disease
• High blood pressure
• High cholesterol
• Gout
• Thalassemia

• History of surgeries
• Immunizations
• Mental health disorders (such as depression, schizophrenia)
• Obesity
• Pregnancy (such as number of children, miscarriages, complications)
• Stroke
• Substance abuse (such as alcohol, drugs)

Lifestyle:
• Exercise
• Habits (such as smoking, drinking, regular doctor/dentist checkup)
• Hobbies and activities
• Nutrition and diet
• Occupation

Be sure to record age at onset of symptoms (when the disease started)
How do I collect family health history?

Talk to your family
Your relatives are the best source of information about your family. Family history is often shared while talking at family events like birthday parties, weddings, reunions, religious gatherings, holiday dinners, and funerals. These events provide a chance to ask family members about their lives.
Use what you have
Check first to see if your family has family trees, charts, or listings of family members. This information may be written in baby books, photo albums, birthday date books, a family bible or other religious records. Review your own medical history with your doctor to make sure you are not forgetting anything.

Plan an individual conversation
After you have brought up the idea of collecting your family health history, you may want to talk with certain family members to get a more complete record of what they know. If possible, record these talks so you can go over them later. This guide includes questions to ask.

Send a Letter
You may wish to send out a letter asking for health information from relatives. Paired with a family luau or reunion, this may be a quick and easy way to collect information. Remember that not everyone will feel comfortable sharing their information in this way, and be sure to explain exactly why you are asking questions.
Tips for collecting family health history

• Start with your parents if they are still living. Often, older relatives are good sources of information and can be the “family historian.”

• If you are adopted, you may be able to learn some of your family history through your adoptive parents. You may also ask to see the adoption agency records.

• It is important to respect others. Some relatives may not want to share their medical histories. Some may not know their family history.

Mapuana's Story

My mother’s side of the family, who has always been active and health conscious, are all fortunately in great health, including my 80-year-old grandparents. I wish the same were true on my father’s side, where there have been numerous diagnosed with many of the chronic conditions that impact Native Hawaiians (i.e., diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, heart disease), and much of this I realize is a result of the lifestyle they choose to engage in (i.e., unhealthy food choices, sedentary lifestyle, alcohol and drug use, etc.). Having been raised primarily by my mother, I have luckily absorbed many of her healthy lifestyle behaviors, and I understand how powerful this can be in
• It can be scary to find out about a health concern in your family. **Sharing family history with your healthcare provider can help** you understand if you are at risk.

• Family members may not clearly identify all diseases. For example, someone who suffered from “the blues” may have had depression. Ask family members to talk about how relatives acted.

transforming not only our own individual health, but the health of our families and communities. The more we can instill for ourselves the importance of a healthy lifestyle as a preventative measure against many of the health risks that impact us through our family history, we create greater opportunity for the future to carry on good health habits and value.
How do I ask my family members about family history?

On the next page is a list of questions that will help you talk with your family members. These questions will help you learn about your family stories, as well as health patterns and any impact environment, lifestyle, and family history may have on family health. Add your own questions that relate to your family.

Prepare ahead of time

• Write down what you know—such as family members’ names, where they were born, or how many children they have.

• Pick the questions you will ask ahead of time.

• Record the interviews on a tape recorder or video camera.

Rose Jane’s Story

Never had I known that hypertension is common on both sides of my parents family. There had been two episodes of heart attack and my grandfather died at a very young age. What is making me worry sick is the fact that diabetes is common in my maternal side.

I am glad I started learning about my family health history. It helped me plan for a lifestyle change one step at a time. I am now on my way to hitting a healthy weight.
During the conversation
• Write down health-related information given by your relative.
• Try to keep the questions short. Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.”
• Use follow-up questions such as “why,” “how,” and “can you give me an example.”
• Do not expect people to know the answers to all of your questions.
• Respect a person’s wishes not to talk about certain topics.
• Ask your family member to show you pictures, recipes, letters, and other family keepsakes. These can help people remember details and lead to more family stories.

Try not to interrupt—let your family member tell his or her story!

There is something I can do. I am starting my family health history with me and my health issues, like the fact that I started wearing glasses when I was 12. I will pass the information on to my children, adding to our family’s ability to live a healthy life.
Sample questions

These questions are examples. You should change them to fit your conversation.

Questions about childhood

- Where were you born?
- Where did you grow up?
- Did you experience any health problems (for example, allergies) as a child?
- Do you have any brothers or sisters? Are they living? How old are they?

Questions about adulthood

- What jobs have you had? Can you tell me about a normal day?
- What was your work environment like?
- Do you have children? What are their names? When were they born? Did they have any health problems?
- What habits (sun exposure, physical activity, smoking, etc.) have you had that could have affected your health?
- Did you have any health problems as an adult? At what age? How was this treated (e.g. medicine, surgery)?
Questions about parents and grandparents

- When and where were your parents born? What do you know about them (for example, their jobs and hobbies)?
- When and where were your grandparents born? What do you remember about them?
- Did your parents or grandparents have any health problems?
- Do you know if your parents or grandparents took medicine on a regular basis? If so, for what? Did they use home remedies? What kinds and for what?

Questions about family life

- Has your family lived anywhere that caused them health problems (e.g. disaster areas, waste sites)?
- What foods does your family usually eat? Describe a typical family breakfast or dinner. Do you eat special foods for special occasions?
- Does anyone smoke? Drink a lot of alcohol? Is anyone overweight?
- Has anyone had problems in pregnancy or childbirth? What kinds of problems?
- Are there any diseases that you think might run in our family?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your life or health concerns in our family?
How can I organize my family health history?

The family health history information you collect can be written down or typed into the computer. It is important to write down all of the information so it makes sense to you, your family, and your healthcare provider. We have included some ideas below to help you organize your information.

**Family health portrait**

A family health portrait is like a family tree showing family members and their health. Because it is a simple picture of your family health history, it can be easily shared with your healthcare provider. Turn to page 18 for more information.

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**Wilma's Story**

My father worked in the plantation fields for 9 years as a pineapple picker. In the long run after inhaling the chemicals being sprayed to stop the pests and plant diseases infestation, he experienced difficulty in breathing and ultimately damaged his lungs and died of lung cancer in 1993 after being in and out of Queens Medical Center. He was 63 years old when he died.

I was deeply sad when I lost my father, for I grew up without him around. It was hard for me to accept that he has to leave us, now that we have reached Lanai to join him and the rest of the family.
Healthcare Provider Card
Online (www.geneticalliance.org/ccfhh), you will find a card to fill out and bring to your provider. The card focuses on concerns you have about your family health history. It also gives your provider more information on how to best use your family health history to figure out your risk for getting a disease.

I did not take for granted the symptoms of respiratory problem especially of being in an environment free from any source of fumes, chemicals and other substances that could damage our body. All of my immediate family are thankful that we are now free from this kind of surroundings and environment. That part of our family health history has served us all a big lesson.
How can I draw a family health portrait?

If you have access to the Internet, you can use the U.S. Surgeon General’s *My Family Health Portrait* to create a family health history tree on your computer.


You can also draw your own family health portrait. Use the example on the next page to help guide you.

**Instructions for drawing a family health portrait**

- Write your name and the date at the top of a large piece of paper.
- Draw yourself at the center using a square if you are a man or a circle if you are a woman.
- Draw your parents above you and label each symbol with his or her name and birth date (or approximate age).
- Draw a line between them and then draw a line down to you.
- When possible, draw your brothers and sisters and your parents’ brothers and sisters from oldest to youngest, going from left to right across the paper.
- Add the health information you collected for each individual.
- Add the ancestry and any other information you have collected.

**Family Health Portrait Legend**

- [ ] male
- [ ] female
- [ ] deceased

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• Add the ancestry and any other information you have collected.

1. To start my family health portrait, I added myself. Any women on the portrait are drawn with a circle. Under my name, I wrote my birth date.

2. Next, I drew in my mother and father. Any men in the portrait are drawn as squares. I connected my parents to each other using one line and drew another line that connected to me.

3. Next, I added my brother and sister and their birthdates. I connected each of them to the line that connects my parents.

4. For my father’s parents, I put their names above his and drew one line connecting them to each other and another line connected to my father. I also added my family’s ancestry. Finally, I drew a line diagonally through my grandmother’s circle to show that she died at age 42.
What now?

- Save your family health history and update it with new information you learn about your family.
- Find out more about the diseases that run in your family and how to stay healthy.
- Share information with your family.
- Take your family health history to your healthcare provider.
- Read “Book 2: A Guide to Genetics and Health.”
Resources

Genetic Alliance Family Health History Resources
www.geneticalliance.org/familyhealthhistory

My Family Health History
https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/fhh-web/home.action
LANAI COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER
www.lanaicommunityhealthcenter.org

PO Box 630142
478 Lauhala Place
808-565-6919 x121
808-565-9111

LCHC's focus is on the individual’s physical, mental, emotional, intellectual and spiritual welfare, and enriches and empowers lives to help build healthy families in a supportive environment.

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