

Know your family's health history for a better future

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

So you have your grandmother's curly hair, your father's nose and your uncle's toothy grin. Aside from what you can see in the mirror, you might have other traits passed down from your family, such as your grandpa's high blood pressure or your grandmother's osteoporosis. Families share lots of things, such as happy memories and laughs — as well as genes, environment and habits.



Collecting your family health history can help you identify your risk for diseases because it reflects both genetic tendencies and shared risk factors.

For example, if your father had colorectal cancer, the information can help your doctor determine how often you should have screenings. Other factors should be considered too, including your diet and level of physical activity.

Some major diseases, such as heart

Begin the conversation

If you've never talked to your family members about health history, you're not alone. Virtually all Americans agree that awareness of their family health history is important, but only one in three has ever started the discussion.

Family reunions and holiday get-togethers are a great place to have a conversation about family health history. For common diseases, you don't need to go back any further than two generations, although having the information doesn't hurt, says CDC epidemiologist Rodolfo Valdez.

"For rare genetic diseases, it would be of benefit to go further back than your grandparents," Valdez says.



disease, diabetes, stroke and some cancers, cluster in families, says Rodolfo Valdez, PhD, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Office of Public Health Genomics.

"Knowing you have a family history of a disease can indicate that you have a risk for that disease," Valdez says.

Even rare diseases like hemophilia can run in families. You and your doctor can find clues to diseases for which you may be at risk. All it takes is a bit of detective work on your part.

Start writing

To get started, try celebrating the next big family dinner in a special way. Instead of a tablecloth, cover the table with a roll of paper. Put some markers at each place setting and add photos of family members going back several generations.

After the dishes have been cleared, encourage everyone to stay at the table. Draw a giant family tree on the paper and start a lively dialogue around 10 questions: What traits run in our family? Did any of our family members have health problems? How old were they when their health problems started or were diagnosed? How old were our family members when they died and what did they die from? Were there any pregnancy losses or babies born with birth defects? Where were our family members born? Did any of our family members smoke, and if so, how much and how long? What lifestyle habits did our family members have? Did they exercise regularly? Were they overweight or underweight? Did they drink too much? Are there any allergies in our family?

During the discussion, remind your family that you're not being nosy; you love them and talking may help all of you pinpoint key features in your family health history that may signal increased risk of disease.

If you are adopted or don't have the option of knowing the family history of your parents,

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keep in mind that family history also has an environmental component, so think about the environmental factors that occurred when you

were growing up. For example, did anyone in your family smoke in the house?

Factors such as these can affect your health, too.

And remember that there are no good or bad genes. According to CDC, most diseases, especially the common ones such as heart disease, result from the interaction of your genes with environmental and behavioral risk factors, which you can change.



Share the love

Now, roll up the paper and give it to a responsible family member to transfer the data into a computer document that can be sent to each person and updated regularly. "My Family Health Portrait," developed by the U.S. Surgeon General's Office in both English and Spanish and available at www.hhs.gov/familyhistory, allows you to collect the information in your computer and transfer it to other family members. There's also a paper form option.

Genetic counselors say family health history is a very powerful key to your own health, and a wonderful legacy to pass down to future generations.



"Family history is something that is not fixed," Valdez says. "Keep it handy and every year or so try to update it, because it changes. If a person gets diagnosed with a disease that year, you need to update it."