

Knowing your family medical history is one of the most important steps toward good health.

Healthy Roots

by Sarah McCoy

Ever wonder what your health will be like in five, 15, 20 years? Would you trust an at-home test to find out if you are at risk for a particular disease? Health care professionals have known for many years that common—and even some rare—diseases can be genetic. However, the days of keeping a written family health history have faded, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 96 percent of people know family medical history is significant to their personal health but only 30 percent keep a record.

So, why aren't more people taking

this into consideration? "The reason for the discrepancy between knowledge and application is simply that it's hard," says Dr. Alan Guttmacher, acting director of the National Human Genome Research Institute and head of the National Institutes of Health's involvement in the Surgeon General's Family History Initiative. "It's like exercise. If you surveyed the public, 96 percent would say that exercise is important for your health, but probably only 25 percent exercise regularly, because it's hard to do."

In an attempt to encourage the public to take a look at their family's genealogy, the U.S. Surgeon General's

Office has launched a national public health campaign called the Surgeon General's Family History Initiative. Through this powerful screening tool, the Surgeon General's Office "encourages Americans to talk about, and to write down, the health problems that seem to run in their family."

According to Guttmacher, the real hurdle is the collection process. Often the specifics of relatives' illnesses aren't openly known or discussed. "It's changing with time, but some health problems, such as mental illness or cancer, just aren't talked about in families. They need to be," Guttmacher says.

Knowing your family health history can help prevent you from suffering the same illnesses as your family members. Guttmacher is living proof of its effectiveness.

“Both of my grandfathers dropped dead of sudden, massive heart attacks in their early 50s,” he explains. “I was always aware of that, but I gradually became overweight and (had) borderline high blood pressure. I decided that wasn’t a good idea, so I lost weight and got my blood pressure under control. Later, I had an early heart attack, but obviously I survived. Because both my grandfathers died of this condition, I knew my family health history put me at more risk than other people. If I hadn’t made behavior changes, I might well be dead.”

The Surgeon General’s Family History Initiative is trying to make the process less cumbersome with its Family Health Portrait website. By visiting this site, anyone can create an online portrait of their family health tree by following a few simple steps. One note of caution: Be prepared to air your family’s dirty health laundry.

At-home tests have also become more accessible to consumers, but they do raise concerns because clinically significant test results are given without the appropriate counseling from a health care professional. As

a result, people are left to interpret complex results on their own.

The results of home-brew genetic tests are not always “black and white,” which can become confusing. A positive result indicates that the laboratory found unusual characteristics in the gene it tested. Depending on the purpose of the test this may confirm a diagnosis, identify an increased risk or indicate the person is a carrier of the disease. It does not necessarily mean that a disease will develop, or if it does, that it will be progressive or severe.

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The FDA states that at-home genetic tests are not suitable substitutes for a traditional health care evaluation. However, if you choose to use a home-brew test, the agency encourages you to talk with your doctor or a genetic counselor to better understand your test results.

Not All in the Family

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But just because your mom or dad had an illness, it doesn’t mean you automatically will too. “Inheriting a variant gene increases risk for developing a disease,” Langston clarifies. “Knowledge of an individual’s family history is a powerful tool in helping physicians to determine risk...and to develop a plan to help in prevention.”

For more information on the Surgeon General’s Family Health Portrait, visit familyhistory.hhs.gov. 

Tips on How to Make *Family Health* Inquiries

Breaching the subject of family members’ illnesses can sometimes be difficult. Don’t let an awkward few minutes or distance keep you from a lifetime of knowledge. Family medicine physician and American Medical Association board member Dr. Edward Langston provides a few tips on how to easily collect your family health history.

- Bring up the subject at your next family gathering when everyone is together and no one feels singled out.
- Take note of even fuzzy information like “my grandmother died of female cancer.” It can help your doctor determine risk factors.
- Discussing family members’ illnesses can also be a way to reminisce about deceased loved ones and can be a bonding experience.
- If you can’t find the opportune occasion, take advantage of National Family History Day on Thanksgiving.
- Don’t be afraid to ask! Many family members are more than willing to provide health information regarding themselves and others.