

Knowing Your Family Health History Could Save Your Life

Healthy aging includes many things – physical health, emotional well being, strong support systems and yes, even genetics. Family health history is a risk factor for many health problems including asthma, cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. When close family members have the same health problem, this can increase other family members' risk of developing the problem. This is because families share their genetics, lifestyles, and environment. Family health history is a tool that can help you understand how genetics impacts your health and the health of younger family members. Knowing what health problems run in your family can guide lifestyle choices and screening tests to prevent or detect disease early.

In November 2004, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Richard H. Carmona issued a Family Health History Initiative, in which he encouraged all Americans to learn about their family health history. Dr. Carmona stated, “Knowing your family health history can save your life. The earlier you know which health conditions run in your family, the easier it is to develop prevention plans with your doctor.”

Preliminary results from a survey of 300 Utah seniors conducted by Brigham Young University researchers show that, while many older adults understand the importance of knowing their family health history (81%), only 30% have actually collected one. The difficulty of obtaining sufficient information (23.7%); lack of time (15.8%); lack of interest (13.7%); and lack of family connectedness (10.4%) were perceived as the major barriers to gathering family health information.

To help you overcome these barriers, the Utah Department of Health and Salt Lake County Aging Services Healthy Aging Program developed a senior-friendly Family Health History Toolkit. The toolkit includes fun ideas, conversation starters, and other resources to help you take the steps to collect a family health history. These include:

- Talking about your family health history during family gatherings.
- Writing down what you learn about your family health history.

- Sharing your family health history with your health care provider and younger family members.

When collecting a family health history, collect information on health problems of close family members such as your children, grandchildren, parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and aunts and uncles. Things that are important to collect about your family members include:

- Age when the health problem started or was diagnosed
- Age and cause of death for family members who have died
- Lifestyle habits (Do they smoke? Do they exercise or eat a healthy diet? Do they have any addictions?)
- Ethnic background

Sharing your family health history with your children and grandchildren is very important. They can benefit greatly from knowing what health problems run in the family. Work together to make healthy choices like eating a healthy diet and exercising. Encourage younger family members to share this information with their health care provider. A health care provider can help you understand your risk for developing a health problem and make recommendations about lifestyle choices and screening tests to lower your risk. Families at a high risk for some health problems may also need to talk with a genetic counselor or other specialist.

Visit www.health.utah.gov/genomics or call 801-538-9416 to get a free copy of the senior-friendly Family Health History Toolkit.