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Spotlight

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Family History Matters!

November 23 is Family History Day



Courtesy: Jane Ades, National Human Genome Research Institute

What better time to find out about your family history than a holiday spent with family: Thanksgiving Day! That advice comes from the Surgeon General, who designated Thanksgiving as Family History Day: a day to map out a family history of chronic diseases or diagnosed health problems.

Sound too dismal to talk about over turkey and stuffing? If you consider knowing about your family history important to your own personal health, then you're similar to the 96% of the public surveyed in a study reported in the November 2004 issue of *Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report* who agreed with you. Yet, consider this: only 30% of the same group of people surveyed actually collected a family history. Now, that's dismal. Especially since studies have shown that individuals who have had several immediate or prior generation family members diagnosed with or died of a chronic disease are at increased risk to develop the same disease.

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How Do You Make a Family History?

Compile a family history by asking your relatives questions related to medical conditions. Sample questions include:

- What major diseases has the family been diagnosed with?
- Who was diagnosed? At what age?
- Was treatment successful?

Contact your relatives by phone or talk with them in person: parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers, half brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, children and grandchildren. If you're married and have children, include your spouse's family history as well. Also check death certificates and family records,

Adapted from: Mayo Clinic's "How to Compile a Family History," <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/medical-history/HQ01707>

For more information on family history, visit:

- National Society of Genetic Counselors' "Your Family History: Your Future," <http://www.nsgc.org/consumer/familytree/index.cfm>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Office of Public Health Genomics' "Family History and Tools," <http://www.cdc.gov/genomics/public/famhistMain.htm>



Family History Matters! (from front page)

With such a strong connection between genetic history and increased risk for chronic disease, why don't more people collect their family history? Because people don't understand the implications of what they know about their family history in terms of their own potential risk, says Paula Yoon, an epidemiologist in the National Office of Public Health Genomics at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. She adds that routine clinical visits often don't include collecting information about a patient's family history. So, collecting one's own family history and bringing concerns and questions to the family physician is a necessary first step.

Many medical-professional organizations, public health care offices, government agencies, and research centers are developing tools to collect (and standardize the collection of) personal health information.

A collection tool widely used by the public is the Surgeon General's "My Family Portrait," which is available online in both English and Spanish. A downloadable form is also available in Portuguese, Chinese, Polish, and French. "My Family Portrait" makes it easy to compile your family history and share it with your health care professionals as well as with your family members.

Another tool is being developed by the CDC and has the potential of being an easy-to-use software in doctors' offices or on a personal PC. This tool, called "Family Healthcare," collects the health history of the individual's first- and second-degree relatives for six diseases: colorectal, breast, and ovarian cancer, coronary heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Yoon explains that the tool is a more complex version of the Surgeon General's "My Family Portrait," which collects the

Complete Your Family History Online

Every month, nearly 16,000 people download or use "My Family Portrait," which is a hands-on family history collection tool you can use and update yourself.

- In English and Spanish from <http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/>
- "My Family Portrait" in other languages: <http://www.brighamandwomens.org/FamilyHistory/PDFTools/FamilyHistoryTools.aspx>

same data. The CDC-developed software requests information about health behavior like smoking, exercise, diet, and use of aspirin. The data received is analyzed. Then a report is generated that gives the individual a risk summary (weak, moderate, or strong) for each of the six chronic diseases and recommends behavioral changes as well as suggests screening tests.

What does "behavior" such as how much you exercise or what you eat have to do with the risk of developing certain diseases? Some diseases can be delayed, even prevented with a healthy diet and regular exercise. New habits, combined with early intervention like targeted screening tests for people predisposed to develop cardiovascular disease, for example, can mean a longer and healthier life. Paula Yoon says "Family Healthcare" is currently being evaluated in a clinical trial that began in 2005.

Now does knowing what you do about the importance of family history make a difference to you? This Thanksgiving, among the delicious goodies spread across the dinner table, make space for a conversation that you'll be thankful for: make a family history. It matters to your health and to your family's health, too.

For more family history information, visit us online at: <http://www.uwcgph.org>

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The goal of **Spotlight** is to educate and update public health practitioners, physicians, and the public on topics in genomics.

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