

Kristina's Story:

When I first started having problems breathing, I was fourteen. I was having what we now know are asthma attacks. Oftentimes, they would start with a cough, and I wouldn't wheeze. I tried numerous medications with no results – they did not work for me. All of these factors led my doctors to postpone making the diagnosis of asthma because, they reasoned, the medicine should work, asthma attacks shouldn't start so quickly, and I should wheeze. So, for two and a half years, I went every month or two to the specialists to try a new medication while still going to the emergency room frequently.

Finally, a doctor asked about my family health history. I hadn't been asked this before. "Yes," I told him, "my dad has mild exercise-induced asthma and one of his sisters, probably his mother, my mom, and several cousins all have asthma. In fact, my dad doesn't wheeze – he only coughs." He determined I too had asthma. I went on a fairly high dose of oral steroids for several months which made a big difference and I rarely went to the emergency room. Finally, relief! I could breathe!

Why do I think knowing your family health history is important? First of all, it's a significant piece of information doctors need in order to make an informed diagnosis. If I could rewrite my experience, it would look something like this: After having my first asthma attack, have some blood drawn to analyze my genetic code. When the doctors received the report back that indicates that I wouldn't respond well to certain medications, they would also receive a recommendation on what would work. It would only take a few months to gain control of my asthma and I would know better what to avoid – without putting my life at risk with experimentation.