

# Questions and Answers

Below are answers to common questions you may have about your family health history.

## WHY IS MY FAMILY HEALTH HISTORY IMPORTANT?

Health problems that run in your family can increase your chance of developing the problem. This is because families share their genetics, environment, lifestyles, and habits. But the good news is by knowing your family health history you can make screening and lifestyle choices to lower your risk.

## WHAT INFORMATION SHOULD I COLLECT?

Collect information on close family members, like parents, brothers and sisters, and children. Then collect information on your grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. Things that are important to collect include:

- Health problems of family members
- Age when the problem started or was diagnosed
- Age and cause of death
- Lifestyle habits (smoker/nonsmoker, diet, weight, and exercise habits)
- Ethnic background

## WHAT HEALTH PROBLEMS RUN IN FAMILIES?

A family health history can help you understand your tendency to get just about any health problem. These health problems can run in families:

- Alzheimer's disease or dementia
- Arthritis
- Asthma
- Birth defects
- Cancer (breast, colon, lung, prostate, ovarian, and other cancers)
- Diabetes
- Depression
- Heart disease or sudden heart attack
- Other heart problems
- High blood pressure and high cholesterol
- Pregnancy losses, stillbirths, and miscarriages
- Stroke or blood clots



## HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M AT RISK FOR A HEALTH PROBLEM?

You may have an increased risk of getting a health problem if your family has:

- Health problems that occur at an earlier age than expected (10 to 20 years before most people get the problem)
- The same health problem in more than one close family member
- A health problem that does not usually affect a certain gender (For example, breast cancer in a male family member)
- Certain combinations of health problems within a family (For example, breast and ovarian cancer or heart disease and diabetes)

Make  
Family  
Health  
History a  
Tradition

## WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE HEALTH PROBLEMS THAT RUN IN MY FAMILY?

Not having a health problem in your family can be good news. But you could still develop a problem because:

- Your lifestyle, personal health history, and environment affect your risk
- You may be unaware of health problems in family members
- A family member may have died young before even developing a health problem

Make healthy choices no matter what your family health history is.

## WHAT IF I'M ADOPTED?

If you are adopted it can be harder to learn about your family health history. But you should still ask your adoptive and birth family about their lifestyle and the places where they have worked or lived. Even though you don't share the same genes, you share habits and environments with your family members. These can also affect your risk of getting a health problem. You may also find health information from birth parents through the National Adoption Clearinghouse.

## WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH MY FAMILY HEALTH HISTORY AFTER I'VE COLLECTED IT?

Share your family health history with your family. Pass it on to your children and grandchildren. By sharing this, you can work together to make healthy choices that could save your life. And remember to keep your family health history updated and in a safe place.

## COULD MY FAMILY HEALTH HISTORY BE USED TO HARM ME?

Your family health history is treated like any other medical information by your doctor. The HIPAA law protects your private health information, which includes your family health history. In Utah, the Utah Genetic Testing Privacy Act also protects you from discrimination based on your genetics.

Be mindful of other family members' health information and keep it private.

## HOW DO I GET STARTED?

Getting started is easy! Simply talk with your family at reunions, holidays, or other family gatherings. Then write down what you learn and share it with your family members and doctor. Use the Family Health History Toolkit to help you collect a family health history.

### References

- CDC Office of Genomics and Disease Prevention [www.cdc.gov/genomics](http://www.cdc.gov/genomics)
- U.S. Surgeon General Family History Initiative [www.hhs.gov/familyhistory](http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory)
- National Society of Genetic Counselors [www.nsgc.org](http://www.nsgc.org)
- Daus, Carol. Past Imperfect: How tracing your family medical history can save your life. California: Santa Monica Press, 1999.

