

Your Family Health History: Let's Talk Turkey

Knowledge is power when it comes to your family health history.

If 2020 taught us anything, it's that we have no control over many aspects of life. One of the best ways to manage stress is to control the things you can and let go of the rest.

You may not have any say over your genetic makeup, but understanding your family health history could help you prevent or proactively manage potential health problems for yourself and your children. This information also guides your medical care. "From a physician's standpoint, more information is always useful. Taking a family history ensures continuity of care. It is time-consuming, and some practitioners are more assiduous in that regard, so some of that responsibility belongs to the patients themselves," says E. Robert Schwartz, M.D., a family medicine physician at the University of Miami Health System.

Whether you celebrate the holidays in person or virtually this year, those occasions offer an ideal opportunity to start or continue the family health history conversation. The Centers for Disease Control has even declared Thanksgiving as National Family Health History Day.



Why family history matters

Many health conditions run in families. Diabetes is a prime example. "If your parent or siblings have diabetes, you have five to six times greater risk of developing diabetes. If you know your family's medical background, your doctor will know to order specific tests to help protect you from diabetes," Dr. Schwartz says. Depending on your history, you might even be a candidate for genetic testing to protect you from other diseases.

While diabetes and problems such as heart disease, hypertension, and osteoporosis are not always genetically linked, your family may have a genetic predisposition toward a particular disease. Nutrition, environmental issues, smoking, and alcohol consumption also influence the chances of developing a disease. We know for sure that some cancers are transmitted through the generations—a woman whose mother, grandmother and aunt had breast cancer has a much greater risk. The same holds true for men with a family history of prostate cancer or men from certain ethnic groups. "African American men are more likely to get prostate cancer," says Dr. Schwartz.

When considering your family health history, don't overlook the impact of psychosocial and environmental factors. "Learning your family's psychosocial issues gives your physician greater insight," Dr. Schwartz says. A family history of alcoholism, addiction, mental illness, or abuse can affect us just as much as a physical health issue. Environment plays a part, too. Was your childhood home permeated with secondhand smoke? Did you live next to a chemical factory or power plant? Did one of your relatives die suddenly, and no one knows why?

"More patients express anxiety about their family history when a close relative died from a disease or died early," says Dr. Schwartz. While you cannot change what happened before, you can change what happens today and in the future.

It all begins with a conversation.

"Family history is not just checking off boxes on a medical form. People forget things, and some don't have the interest or education to convey information. However, if the doctor takes the time to have a more fluid conversation, things can be revealed," says Dr. Schwartz.

He encourages us to sit down with our parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins and talk. "Most people enjoy the conversation. I spent almost two hours with my own mother in New Jersey, with a video camera on the kitchen table, asking her about our family," Dr. Schwartz says. Some families face more significant obstacles to gaining insight into their family background. "Miami has a significant Haitian population, many of whom simply don't know their family history. It's difficult for physicians to pull information out of this group."

Ease your way into the discussion by expressing interest in your family history before diving into medical issues. Capture oral and visual information with your cell phone camera, video, or recorder. "You're creating a living document that will serve you and future generations and may even contribute to research," says Dr. Schwartz.

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