



DISCOVERING AND USING YOUR FAMILY HEALTH HISTORY

What is family health history?

Family health history is a record of the diseases and health conditions in your family. You and your family members share genes. You may also have behaviors in common, such as exercise habits and what you like to eat. You may live in the same area and come into contact with similar things in the environment. Family history includes all of these factors, any of which can affect your health.

How can I collect my family health history?

You may know a lot about your family health history or only a little. To get the complete picture, use family gatherings as a time to talk about health history. If possible, look at death certificates and family medical records. Collect information about your parents, sisters, brothers, half-sisters, half-brothers, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. Include information on major medical conditions, causes of death, age at disease diagnosis, age at death, and ethnic background. Be sure to update the information regularly and share what you've learned with your family and with your doctor. You can use the Surgeon General's web-based tool called "[My Family Health Portrait](#)" to keep track of the information.

Why is family health history important for my health?

Most people have a family health history of at least one chronic disease, such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. If you have a close family member with a chronic disease, you may be more likely to develop that disease yourself, especially if more than one close relative has (or had) the disease or a family member got the disease at a younger age than usual.

Collect your family health history information before visiting the doctor, and take it with you. Even if you don't know all of your family health history information, share what you do know. Family health history information, even if incomplete, can help your doctor decide which screening tests you need and when those tests should start.

How can I use my family health history to improve my health?

You can't change your genes, but you can change unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, not exercising or being active, and poor eating habits. If you have a family health history of disease, you may have the most to gain from lifestyle changes and screening tests. In many cases, adopting a healthier lifestyle can reduce your risk for diseases that run in your family. Screening tests, such as diabetes screening, mammograms, and colorectal cancer screening, help find early signs of disease. Finding disease early can often mean better health in the long run.

Source: www.cdc.gov/genomics/famhistory/

www.commonhealth.virginia.gov

The contents of the CommonHealth weekly emails may be reprinted from an outside resource in the area of health, safety, and wellness and is intended to provide one or more views on a topic. These views do not necessarily represent the views of the Commonwealth of Virginia, CommonHealth, or any particular agency and are offered for educational purposes. If you have questions or concerns about this article, please email us at wellness@dhrm.virginia.gov