Resources to help you learn your family health history

❖ More information on the importance of family health histories:
  • U.S. Surgeon General’s Family History Initiative
    www.hhs.gov/familyhistory

❖ A Family Health History Toolkit:
  • Minnesota Gene Pool
    www.minnesotagenealogy.umn.edu

❖ Learn how to research your family history:
  • Minnesota Historical Society
    www.mnhs.org/genealogy

A close look at your family health history is the BEST way to see what health risks may run in your family.

Your Family Health Tree: A Guide

Family health history: Your gift to the future

Health Promotion and Chronic Disease
85 E. Seventh Place, Suite 400
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www.health.state.mn.us
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Your family health history has a story to tell...about your future health

A family health history is a picture of the shared lives and health of your family.

A complete family history can help you identify health risks.

Family members share many things – habits, lifestyles, and environments. They also share traits that can be passed down through the generations. This is why family members often look alike.

Juan’s Story

Every man in my family has dropped dead before the age of 50... my father, my grandfather and my uncles. I always assumed that I wouldn’t make it to 50.

A few years ago my cousin told me that he told his doctor about our family health history. His doctor did some tests and found out that my cousin was at risk for heart disease. Maybe even a heart attack. He put my cousin on medication to lower his cholesterol and told him to stop eating fried foods.

I talked to my doctor and got the same tests and advice. Last year, I threw the biggest 50th birthday party ever!

Make healthy choices no matter what your family history shows

Even if health problems run in your family, you can reduce your own risk by making healthy choices.

▸ Get more exercise
▸ Eat fruits and vegetables daily
▸ Don’t smoke or chew tobacco
▸ Drink alcohol in moderation
▸ Maintain a healthy weight
▸ Go to the doctor on a regular basis

Know your past.
Act in the present.
Protect your future.

Photos courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society
A family health history belongs to your whole family

Kelly’s Story

At the last O’Leary-McGee pig roast, I used tablecloth paper from a roll to create a huge family tree for both families, filled in as much as is known and left many large blocks of blank space. Then, I posted it in the barn, along with a dozen magic markers, and asked that everyone help fill in the branches with as much information as possible.

People, many of whom I had never met, filled in their ancestral lines up to the present – some wrote interesting anecdotes about their relatives. For instance, “Clifford moved to Oregon in 1946. In 1949, a flood wiped out their home.” Others noted occupations and diseases, all very useful information.

One woman said that malignant thyroid tumors ran in her family, and since then, several relatives have had genetic testing that resulted in surgery, which has saved their lives. For the first time in memory, more people stood around the barn “chewing the fat” rather than around the buffet tables stuffing their faces. We talked and shared stories, but more importantly, we became more closely acquainted.

Beginning the climb: Learning your family health tree

**COLLECT** health information on family members

☞ Talk with your relatives to find out about the health conditions in the family

**WRITE** down your family health history

**LOOK** for patterns in your family health history

☞ The same health problem in more than one family member

☞ Relatives with the same health problem at an earlier age than usual

☞ Risky lifestyles and habits: smoking, heavy drinking, poor diet, not enough physical activity

☞ Relatives who have died young

**UPDATE** your family history every year – a family health history is most useful when it’s current
Questions to get you started

Do any of our family members have health problems? Such as:

- Arthritis
- Asthma
- Cancer
- Depression
- Diabetes
- Heart Disease
- Osteoporosis
- Stroke

How old were our family members when their health problem started or was diagnosed?

How old were our family members when they died?

What was the cause of their deaths?

Were there any pregnancy losses or babies born with birth defects?

Our family health history

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Talk to your health care provider and relatives about your family health tree

Tell your health care provider about diseases found in your family

Ask questions:

- What is the usual age of onset for these diseases? Were any of my relatives diagnosed earlier than usual?
- Am I at increased risk for a health problem?
- Do I need to be screened?
- Are there tests available to detect the health problem early?
- What can I do to reduce my risk?
- Do I need to talk to a genetic counselor about my risk?

Give your family health history to your family