

# ***FAMILY MEDICAL HISTORY: WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?***

## **What is Family Medical History (FMH)?**

FMH is a record of any diseases or medical conditions that affect your family members. Families share genetic information so just like certain physical traits that run in families, such as eye color and hair color, there are certain health problems that can run in families, too.

## **Why is it important to know my Family Medical History?**

Knowing your FMH can help your doctor identify whether you have a higher than usual chance of developing medical conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers to name a just a few.

## **If someone in my family has a certain medical condition, does that mean I will develop it, too?**

Just because someone in your family has a certain medical condition does not mean you are guaranteed to develop it. However, there are some specific diseases that you may be at a greater risk of developing if your family members have those conditions. It's also important to remember that even if there is no family history of a certain disease, you may still be at risk of developing it based on lifestyle choices and environmental factors.

## **How does my doctor use my Family Medical History?**

Your doctor will review your FMH with you to determine if there are screening tests, medications, or lifestyle changes that may help you decrease the risk of developing a disease that runs in your family. For example, if your mother had colon cancer, your doctor may recommend for you to receive a screening colonoscopy at an earlier age than recommended for the general population.

## **What information should be included in my Family Medical History?**

Generally a complete FMH includes at least 3 generations of family members including yourself, your grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters (including half-brothers or half-sisters), and your children. It can also be helpful to know the medical history of your aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and even cousins if you can gather that information. The most important things to know about your family members' health is:

**-Age, Sex, and Ethnicity**

**-Medical conditions** (including mental health conditions and substance use conditions like alcoholism)

**-Age at diagnosis** of each condition and **any treatments** they have received

**-Lifestyle** (knowing a little about their diet, exercise, or tobacco use can be helpful, too)

**-If a family member has passed away, it is helpful to know their age at death and cause of death**

## **How do I gather information from my family members about their health history?**

The best way to obtain information is to talk directly to your family members about their health. Some people find it helpful to collect this information during family gatherings such as reunions or holidays. Offer to make this information available to other family members so they too can share it with their doctors, but remember to always respect the privacy of your relatives and their health information. Some family members may feel uncomfortable talking about their health and that is okay. Be sure to approach this in a non-judgmental way and share the reasons why learning more about their health history can help keep your entire family healthy, including future generations.

## **Where can I learn more about Family Medical History?**

- Create and share your family's health history online at: <https://familyhistory.hhs.gov>
- Learn more at: <http://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/handbook/inheritance/familyhistory>
- Even more information at: <http://www.genesinlife.org>