

Talk it up, write it down, pass it on
How to Collect Family Health History: What's Important?

Your family health history is important. It helps you and your doctor to make a personal health care plan. How and what information to collect can be confusing but is important for you and your doctors. Follow these simple steps to create your family health history:

- Think about three generations of relatives. This means your parents, children, siblings, nieces/nephews, aunts/uncles, cousins, and grandparents.
- Write down any significant sickness, disease, or other health condition for each of these family members. Be sure to include birth defects, learning problems/delays, intellectual disabilities, and chronic health problems (for example: diabetes, thyroid disease, heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's disease). Sudden deaths should also be written down.
- For each health problem, it is important to write down the age the person was first diagnosed.
- Details on the type of disease is also important. For example, instead of saying that a person has "thyroid disease," it is important to write down whether it was hyper- or hypothyroidism, or a nodule, cancer, etc. For family members with cancer, the type of tumor and where it was first found is important (ex. breast cancer that spread to the brain should be listed as breast cancer. Write down other important details if known, such as whether it was in one or both breasts, and the tumor type, such as adenocarcinoma). Heart disease is also a common health problem but there are many types, including coronary artery disease, structural defects, cardiomyopathies, arrhythmias, etc., so the more you can find out the better.
- Talk to as many family members as possible, especially about relatives who have passed away. Many times you may find that different family members have different stories about what happened to certain people in your family. It may take some detective work to get a good understanding of the family health history. Family gatherings, such as during the holidays, may be a good time to ask questions.

It can be hard to collect your family health history, especially if someone in your family is private about their sickness or if you have certain family members with whom you do not speak often. Any information is better than none, however, so write down what you can and talk to your doctor about the information you are able to collect.