

Understanding Health Risk: Using Family Health Histories to Promote Health



A family health history is a record of the diseases and conditions a person's close family members have or had. People can use family health histories to better understand their own health and health risks.

Who should be included in family health histories?

Many diseases can run in families and have a genetic component. Additionally, families live in shared environments and may be exposed to similar risk factors for diseases, like radon.

Family health histories should include close relatives, including those who have already passed away:

First Degree Relatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parents• Siblings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Children
Second Degree Relatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grandparents• Aunts and uncles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nieces and nephews• Half-siblings
Third Degree Relatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First cousins• Great-grandparents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Great-aunts and uncles• Half-aunts and uncles



Understanding the diseases that affect family members can help people better understand their own health and health risks, empowering them to manage their environments and to seek medical advice to prevent, diagnose, and manage chronic diseases that they may have an increased risk for.

How should a family health history be constructed?

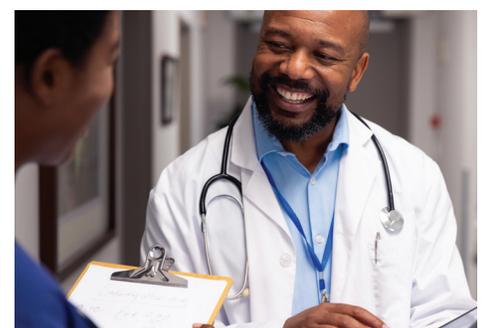
The first step in making a family health history is to make a family tree of relatives. Then, include their major medical diseases and conditions, age at diagnosis, and cause and age of death. Include information on relatives for as many generations as possible. People who cannot access their family health history should tell their healthcare providers and create a plan for disease screenings and genetic tests.

What diseases should a family health history include?

Family health histories should cover diseases that have a genetic or shared environmental component, such as cardiovascular disease (heart disease, hypertension, stroke, etc.), some cancers (breast, colorectal, lung, ovarian, and prostate cancers), type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, some eye issues (glaucoma, macular degeneration), sickle cell disease, and autoimmune diseases (thyroid diseases, rheumatoid arthritis, celiac disease, etc.). It is also useful to consider the circumstances in which relatives lived. What was their work environment like? What was their housing situation? Did they live in a rural or urban setting? For various reasons, racial and ethnic backgrounds of family members are useful to know, especially as some diseases occur more frequently in people of certain races or ethnicities.

What happens after a person creates a family health history?

After completing a family health history, individuals can discuss it with a member of their healthcare team (physician, nurse, physician assistant, community health worker, patient navigator, registered dietician, etc.) with the goals of recognizing disease risk and taking actions to prevent diseases from occurring, including possible genetic testing. Disclosing family health histories is important, including in instances where a cancer survivor has a family history of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, hypertension, stroke, or type 2 diabetes.



Cancer Fatalism

Cancer fatalism is the idea that getting cancer is beyond a person's control (e.g., "No matter what I do, I'm going to get cancer." or "I can't lower my chances of getting cancer because of my family history.") It is often caused by seeing loved ones experience negative cancer outcomes and can include feelings of pessimism and hopelessness that can prevent people from getting cancer screenings, making healthy lifestyle choices, and seeking care.

Some communities may also experience fatalism originating from cultural perspectives or limited levels of education or health literacy. Cancer fatalism, combined with stigma, may prevent people from disclosing health risks, such as smoking or family health histories, with healthcare professionals. It is important to remind people that they can still reduce their risk of disease and prevent medical complications to maintain better health, even if they have a family health history of cancer.

Tips for Promoting Family Health Histories

- Promote creating a family health history during the holidays, family reunions, birthday parties, and other family gatherings within accepted family norms.
- Provide resources to address health myths and [misconceptions](#) among families.
- Use [positive messaging](#) that empowers people to take charge of their health once they know their family health history.
- Provide resources, like where to obtain free or low-cost cancer screenings, to assist people as they take action after completing a family health history.
- Consider how individuals in your community will access resources for building family health histories. Provide online and printed tools in languages relevant to the communities you serve.
- Promote family health histories in communities that are especially affected by chronic diseases. Individuals in these communities may especially benefit from knowledge of family health, which can lead to accessing health services.

How Can Organizations Help People Build Family Health Histories?

Action Item	Steps	Resources
Encourage families to create a family health history.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the importance of family health histories via media. • Share family health history information around holidays. • Share tools to help people make family health histories. • Inform community members that some cancers can be genetically linked. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family Health History Info - Family Health History and Cancer - Family Health Portrait: Cancer App for iOS and Android - Learn Your Family History of Breast and Ovarian Cancer • The United States Surgeon General's My Family Health History Portrait • National Institutes of Health's Families SHARE printable workbook in English or Spanish
Help people act on their family health history to lessen their risk of serious disease.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect people with information on lowering risks of heart disease, cancer, and other hereditary diseases. • Help people find low-cost health care. • Connect people with cancer screening resources. • Connect people to resources that address social determinants of health during cancer screening, treatment, and survivorship to increase adherence and follow-up. • Share resources to help people quit tobacco. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDC Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family Health History and Chronic Disease - Free and low-cost cancer screening through National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program - Talking About Your Family History of Cancer - Tips from Former Smokers • National Cancer Institute's Cancer Support Services • Feeding America's Mobile Food Pantries • Health Resources and Services Administration's Health Center Locator • American Cancer Society's (ACS) Guideline for Diet and Physical Activity for Cancer Prevention • American Heart Association's Healthy Living Resources
Utilize multi-disciplinary healthcare teams to enhance patient-engagement and patient-provider interventions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop workflows that allow all members of healthcare teams to document and assess people's family health histories. • Create environments where people feel comfortable disclosing information about their family health history. • Ask questions about family health histories and encourage patients' questions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centers for Medicare and Medicaid's Person & Family Engagement Strategy: Sharing With Our Partners • American Medical Association's Collecting a Family History • National Academy of Medicine's Patient and Family Engaged Care: An Essential Element of Health Equity • American Academy of Family Physicians' A Simple Approach to Shared Decision Making in Cancer Screening • Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's The SHARE Approach—Essential Steps of Shared Decisionmaking: Expanded Reference Guide with Sample Conversation Starters • ACS' Health Systems Screening for Social Determinants of Health
Help people find access to genetic testing to better understand risk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share resources to help people understand how genetics can affect health. • Connect people with financial assistance programs for genetic testing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDC's Genetic Counseling for Hereditary Breast and Ovarian Cancer • National Coordinating Center for the Regional Genetics Networks' Medicaid Coverage Map for genetic testing • Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered's list of financial assistance resources

