

Family History is important to your health

Most of us know that we can lower our chance of getting a disease by eating healthy foods, getting enough exercise, and not smoking. But did you know that your family health history might be one of the best ways to find out if you are at risk for getting heart disease, stroke, diabetes, or cancer? If you know your family history, it can help you lower your risk of having health problems.

Family History and Your Risk of Disease

Family members share their genes, as well as routines and habits. Everyone can see traits that run in their family, such as curly hair or dimples. Risks for diseases such as asthma, cancer, and heart disease also run in families.

No one's family history of disease is the same. Some features of a family history that may raise a person's risk are:

- ◆ Diseases that occur at a younger age than expected (10-20 years before most people get the disease)
- ◆ Disease in more than one blood relative
- ◆ Disease that does not usually affect a certain sex (such as breast cancer in a man)
- ◆ Certain combinations of diseases



within a family (such as breast cancer and cancer of the ovaries, or heart disease and diabetes)

Using Family History to Improve your Health

People with a family history of disease may have the most to gain from lifestyle changes and screening tests. You can't change your genes. You can change unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, being inactive, and poor eating habits. Living a healthy lifestyle can reduce your risk for diseases that run in your family.

Screening tests (such as a mammogram) can find diseases like cancers at an early stage when they are the most able to be treated. Screening tests can also find disease risk factors like high cholesterol and high blood pressure, which can be treated to reduce the chances of getting diseases.

Learning About Your Family Health History

To learn about your family health history:

- ◆ ask questions and talk at family events
- ◆ look at death certificates and old medical records, if possible.

Collect information from your blood relatives, including grandparents, parents, siblings, and children.

