



PAF Express

*Washington County PAF Users Group
From August 2005 Newsletter*

Tracing Your Family Medical History

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Your Guide to Genealogy.

www.about.genealogy.com

Are You at Risk?

You know you got your curly red hair from your grandmother, and your prominent nose from your dad. These aren't the only things you may have inherited from your family, however. Many medical conditions, including heart disease, breast cancer, prostate cancer, diabetes, alcoholism and Alzheimer's disease have also been shown to be passed down through families.

What Is A Family Medical History?

A record of important medical information about your relatives, a family health or medical history is begun by talking with your immediate family members parents, grandparents and siblings as they provide the most important links to genetic risk. A family medical history helps document familial patterns which may impact your health, such as trends towards specific types of cancer, early heart disease, or even something simple such as skin problems.

Why is a Family Medical History Important?

Some studies say that over 40 percent of the population is at increased genetic risk for a common disease such as cancer, diabetes or heart disease. Understanding your risk for developing such diseases is an important reason to learn more about your family history. By knowing your risk, you can make informed decisions about prevention and screening, and even participate in genetic-based research aimed at understanding, preventing and curing disease. For example, if your father had colon cancer at age 45, you should probably be screened at an earlier age for colon cancer than age 50, the average age for first-time colon cancer screening.

What Should Be Included in a Family Medical History?

Going back about three generations (to your grandparents or greatgrandparents), try to collect details on every direct family member who has died and the cause of death. Also, document the medical conditions of all family members, including the age at which they were first diagnosed, their treatment, and if they ever had surgery. Important medical conditions to document include:

- Cancer
- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Asthma
- Mental illness
- High blood pressure
- Stroke
- Kidney disease
- Alcoholism
- Birth defects

- Learning disabilities
- Vision or hearing loss

For family members with known medical problems, make notes on their overall health, including if they smoked, were overweight, and their exercise habits. If a family member had cancer, be sure to learn the primary type and not just where it metastasized. If your family members came from a different country, make note of that as well, as some medical conditions have possible ethnic roots.

How Should I Document My Family Medical History?

Family medical history can be recorded in a similar manner to the traditional family tree, just using standard medical symbols in a pedigree format :

http://genealogy.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=genealogy&z=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nsgc.org%2Fconsumer%2Ffamilytree%2Ftree_images.asp

Squares for men and circles for women. You can either use a standard key, or create your own which specifies what your symbols mean. See Tools for Recording Your Family Medical History for more information, examples, forms and questionnaires:

http://genealogy.about.com/od/health_history/index.htm

My Family Can't Help Me, Now What?

If your parents are deceased or relatives are uncooperative, it may take some real detective work to learn more about your family's medical past. If you can't get access to medical records, try death certificates, obituaries and old family letters. Even old family photos can provide visual clues to diseases such as obesity, skin conditions and osteoporosis. If you're adopted or otherwise can't learn more about your family's health history, be sure to follow standard screening recommendations and see your doctor for a physical on a regular basis.

Keep in mind that the format and questions don't have to be perfect. The more information you gather, in whatever format is easiest for you, the more informed you'll be about your medical heritage. What you learn could literally save your life!