

Family Health History

Perhaps you've noticed that some branches of your family lived longer than others. Many of the men on dad's side lived well into their 80s. Whereas, it was not unusual on mom's side for some to pass away in their 60s. Why the difference? What caused their deaths? Are there common health characteristics? What does this mean to me and my descendants?

Family health history, also known as medical genealogy, is getting more interest from heritage researchers. Many of the factors that determine our health today (or illnesses) were inherited from our ancestors. Experts state that about 3000 of the 10,000 known diseases have genetic links, and that many diseases "run in families", such as colon cancer, heart disease, alcoholism, and high blood pressure. Creating a family health history can be a useful tool for you and your medical care provider in interpreting patterns of health, illness, and traits for you and your descendants.

Getting started is just like any heritage research project - begin with what you know. Record the medical and health facts for yourself, then go back a generation at a time. The items to record can include:

- Birth and death dates if deceased, along with cause.
- Ethnic background, as some genetic diseases occur in particular ethnic groups.
- Major illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, etc.
- General patterns of ill health, like chronic sore throats.
- Birth defects
- Allergies, both environmental and drug related.
- Emotional or behavioral problems, such as depression, heavy drinking, anxiety, etc.
- Chronic health problems like asthma or high blood pressure.
- Vision and hearing problems.
- General health routines, like tobacco use and diet.

Be sure to note when conditions occur. For example, did grandma have diabetes as a child, or did it develop later in her adult life? Please also remember to respect everyone's privacy as you go about gathering this information. The information is for you, your medical professional, and your descendant's use. Don't publish this as part of your Internet web page, for example.

Sources for information can include your medical records and the recollections of you and your living relatives. But for deceased ancestors, you can try:

- Death certificates will list cause of death, but obituaries may also yield information.
- Pension documents and Social Security Applications.
- Family bibles, diaries, old correspondence and the like.
- Military records

To organize your data, you can enter it in your genealogy software program as written text or some programs, like GeneWeaver, can create a medical genogram. A genogram is a schematic diagram of family relationships and diseases, which is used by your doctor to determine if there is a risk of inherited illnesses, which could lead to early detection and prevention.

Who knows, maybe the information you find today will save a life tomorrow.

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