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THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY HISTORY

Many of our wellness articles focus on lifestyle and prevention. After all, there are many things you can do to improve your health and reduce your risk of contracting a number of diseases.

But which diseases are you most at risk for? Have you ever been asked by your doctor if anyone in your family suffers from a particular disease or if you have a family history of a certain medical condition?

This is valuable information. But many of us have no idea. Family history is an important risk factor for many common diseases such as diabetes, asthma, osteoporosis and several cancers.

There are many diseases and conditions in which hereditary genes play a role. If you have a family member suffering from a particular condition, it is worthwhile to bring it to the attention of your doctor.



But how many of us really know about the health concerns of our family members?

You may know about your mother's heart condition or your uncle's problems with breathing, but do you know the technical names of afflictions? When they started?

Knowing these details is a little harder. But it is details such as these that are important to medical professionals like doctors, who need the information to evaluate your personal medical risks.

That is why health professionals encourage patients to create what is called a medical family tree. Medical information is listed for family members, making up a chronological and detailed listing of diseases present or previously known in the family.

Don't worry, you don't have to track down complex and technical information. Simply having the age of the person, along with the name of their disease and age of diagnosis is sufficient. Being able to present this information to a doctor at a yearly physical, for example, is very valuable.

This information is so important that a "National Family History Day" occurs annually on the American Thanksgiving in November. This day serves as a reminder to obtain and record a family medical history.

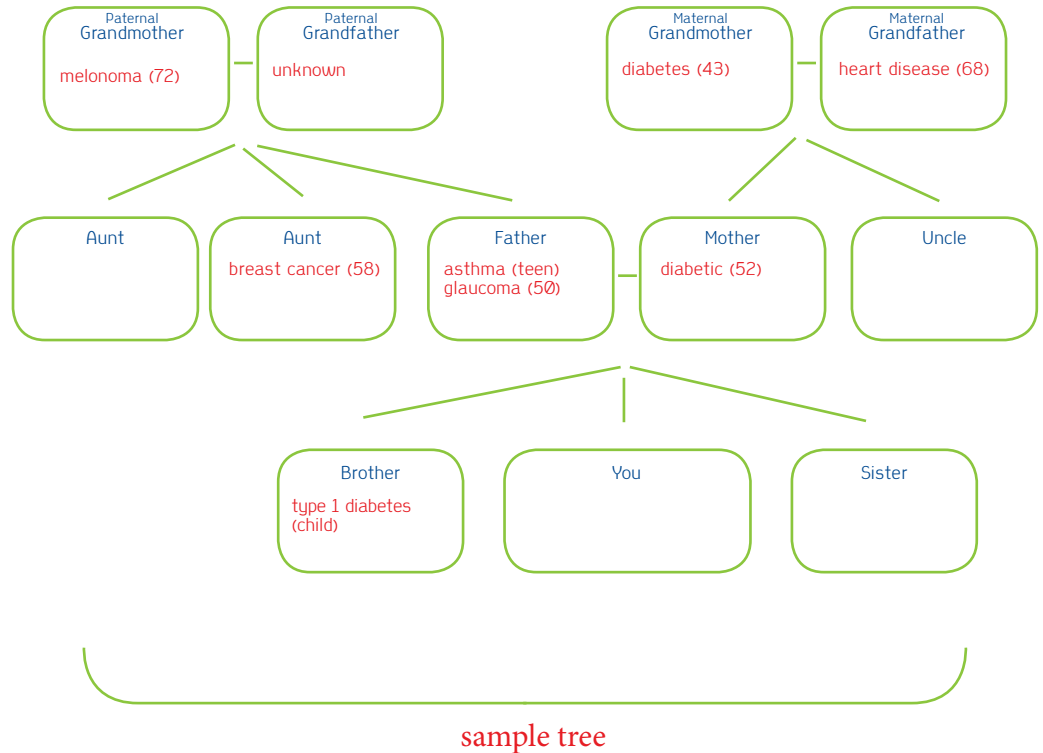
The US government even created a free tool called [My Family Health Portrait](#) to help individuals create a comprehensive tree. But you don't have to use a computer to create this document.

Simply grab a piece of paper at your next family event and start recording data. It's alright if it's incomplete – few people are able to make a perfect tree!

FAMILY HISTORY

When the tree is done:

- Give a copy to your doctor and have them review it with you. They may ask further questions to help interpret the information.
- Your doctor should be better able to suggest appropriate screening tests for you.
- Send a copy of the health record to other family members; they should also share it with their own medical professionals.
- Update the document regularly, maybe at each holiday gathering.



Although it can be unpleasant or uncomfortable to discuss hereditary health issues, knowing the conditions that exist in your family can help with your future health.

Prevention is key. And the more you know, the more you can do to make sure you stay on top of things like check-ups, special screening programs and other preventative measures related to your health.

Remember, family health history isn't a definite diagnosis. But it can help you know which conditions to be on the look for and give you a head start on reducing your risks.

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