



Family Medical History: Why Bother?

As research continues into the role of genes in disease, we are learning that your family's health history has an effect on your personal health risks. Cancer is just one example of a common disease in which family history can impact personal risk. Other conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease also have some genetic component.

Cancer in the Family

A family history of cancer can increase your own risk for developing cancer. Learning more about your relatives who have had cancer is an important step in determining your own risk so you can screen appropriately. Cancer can be a difficult subject to talk about, even with family members. It may be helpful to let your relatives know why you are asking about their health and to explain that the entire family could benefit from having the information.

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Human Genetics: Collecting Your Family's Medical History



The Hereditary Cancer Program
Division of Human Genetics

Suggestions for talking to relatives
about a family history of cancer



Documenting Your Family Health History...

The First Step Toward Understanding Your Risks

Getting Started

Learn the names, as well as the dates of birth and death (if possible), for:

- Your parents, aunts, uncles and cousins
- Your grandparents, their siblings and their siblings' children
- Your great grandparents

Important Questions

- Has anyone had a history of chronic illness?
- What were the causes of death for deceased relatives?
- Where did your ancestors live before coming to the United States?

For people who have had cancer:

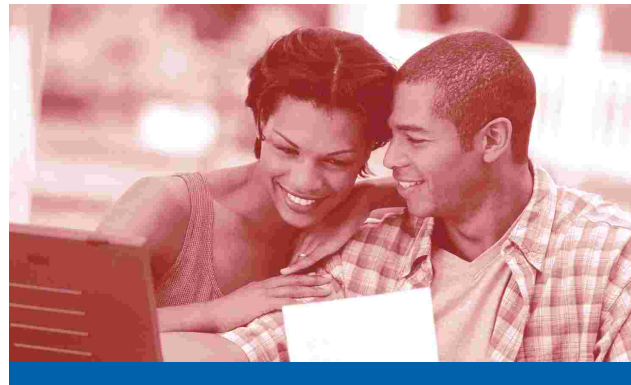
- Where did the cancer start?
- At what age was it diagnosed?
- Has anyone in your family had more than one kind of cancer?

Finding Information

Many people find it difficult to learn about distant relatives and older generations. Possible sources of information include:

- Death certificates
- Federal census records
- Military service or pension records
- Cemetery or funeral home records
- Hospital records
- Diaries, family bibles, photographs

If someone in your family has started researching your genealogy, save yourself some time and effort, and find out what they may have already learned.

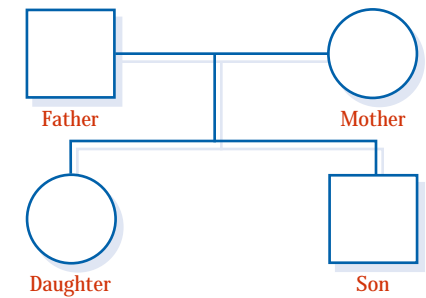


Recording Information

In addition to health history, it may be helpful to record physical characteristics of relatives, such as weight, height and unusual physical features, as well as the source of your information.

Genetics professionals record family history information in the form of a drawing called a "pedigree." Circles are used to represent women in the family and squares represent men.

A sample pedigree:



Using this format allows you to record a lot of information in a small amount of space; however, there are other ways to record information as well. Just make sure whichever way you choose is legible and understandable to you.

For More Information

To learn more about how cancer in your family may affect your risk, please call:

The Hereditary Cancer Program
513-636-4760

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