

Writing A Family Health History

Q: Is it helpful to have a written family health history?

A: Yes. A written family health history creates a record that helps you and your loved ones—as well as your health providers.. A history can show if you, your children, or your grandchildren might be at risk for developing serious health problems. Your health care providers can use this history to determine the risk of diseases that run in the family. For older adults, a family health history might help explain why you have developed certain health conditions.

A written health history includes information about any medical conditions in your family, as well as lifestyle habits, like smoking or drug use. There are some health problems that can run in a family, such as Alzheimer's disease, arthritis, asthma, blood clots, cancer, depression, diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, pregnancy losses and birth defects, and stroke. There are some ways to reduce the chance of getting these diseases.

A family health history can show if you or your children might have a higher risk of developing a serious health problem. There are also some less common diseases that a health history would reveal, like hemophilia, or sickle cell anemia. You can't alter the genes you've inherited from your parents—but you can change your diet, your exercising, and your medical care to try to lower your chances of getting certain diseases. A through health history helps you adjust your lifestyle to avoid health problems. Many diseases result from more than just genetics. Your lifestyle and environment also play an important role. You can take actions to lower your risk of disease, like eating healthier foods, getting regular exercise, and taking medicines that are more effective based on your family's genetics. Doctors will ask new patients for their health history, but it would be useful to create a broader history in writing that includes your parents, grandparents, and your siblings.

Your doctor will use this history to make specific recommendations to lower the chance of getting certain diseases. If one of your parents had diabetes, for example, your doctor might want you

to monitor your weight and exercise more. If your daughter is considering having a baby, she might get tested to see if she carries a gene for any rare conditions that were listed in a family history. .

To help you create a written family health history, there are some free tools to get you started. The U.S. Surgeon General publishes a free *'My Family Health Portrait'* in a print and online version that organizes your family health history information. Once you fill your family health history, you can keep it for your records, share the completed form with your doctor and with family members. Any information you submit to the online version of *'My Family Health Portrait'* stays private. It is not shared with the government or anyone else. You should collect your family's health history in advance, to make it easier to fill out the forms. You can also use *'My Family Health Portrait'* to calculate your disease risk based on your family history for certain common disorders like diabetes and colorectal cancer. You can also just collect your family health history on a blank sheet of paper.

From a family health history, your doctor may want you to take a genetic test to see if you have a mutation, or harmful change, in a gene inherited from a parent. A genetic test takes a small sample of blood, saliva, or tissue is taken to examine your genes. These tests can detect diseases that may be preventable or treatable, such as Huntington's disease, sickle cell anemia, and muscular dystrophy. Genetic tests can help you, or your children, take steps to lower your chance of developing a disease through earlier, or more frequent screening or changes in diet and exercise habits. Genetic testing can cost anywhere from less than \$100 to more than \$2,000. If your doctor wants to do some genetic tests, check with your health insurance company to see if they will cover part or all of the cost of testing. Most diseases that run in the family are not strictly genetic.

To see the Surgeon General's health history tool, go to:

<https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/FHH/html/index.html>

My Family Health Portrait

A tool from the Surgeon General



Using My Family Health Portrait you can:

- Enter your family health history.
- Learn about your risk for conditions that can run in families.
- Print your family health history to share with family or your health care provider.
- Save your family health history so you can update it over time.

Talking with your health care provider about your family health history can help you stay healthy!

[Learn more about My Family Health Portrait](https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/FHH/html/index.html) at
<https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/FHH/html/index.html>