



Family Health Histories: More than Just Asking Questions and Getting Answers



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Each clinician should apply his or her own professional judgment to the specific clinical circumstances presented by an individual patient.

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Why is a family health history important?

Family health histories may be an old-fashioned method of disease prevention and health maintenance, but they are definitely not outmoded. Common medical conditions often run in families. If a family member has a serious medical condition, it does not necessarily mean that a patient or anyone else in the family will have the condition; but in some cases, genetic factors, shared environments, lifestyles and habits can predispose family members to an illness. It is best to be aware of the risks, and use family health history as a tool when planning for good health.

Can a family health history help lower the risk for disease?

Absolutely! Your patients cannot change their genes, but they can change behaviors that affect their health, such as smoking, inactivity and poor eating habits. Patients with a family history of a particular disease may have the most to gain from making lifestyle changes.

How do I gather a patient's family health history?

Use the family health history questionnaire from the Illinois Department of Public Health. Go through the questionnaire with patients and pass it on to your genetic coordinator when necessary.

Make it part of your routine. As a health care provider, you're very busy. Gathering a family health history can be time consuming, but it's also an extremely valuable diagnostic tool, absolutely worth the time it takes to record. Ask about family history at every patient intake and update the information during check-ups and return visits.

It can be difficult to ask personal questions. Well done family health histories involve a lot of personal details. It's okay if you're uncomfortable asking, but getting answers is worth the effort. Here are a few tips that will make gathering a family health history a little easier:

- **Let your patient control the interview.** Try asking permission to talk about family history with your patients and then let them lead the discussion, taking some of the pressure off you.
- **Make it a conversation.** Frame the interview as a time to tell stories about family. A less clinical discussion will feel easier for both you and your patients.
- **Take your time.** Try not to rush through the questionnaire. If you can, look at the questions ahead of time and get a feel for them.

Talking about family health history can be difficult for patients.

If your patient is hesitant or has difficulty discussing family health history, here are some tips:

- **Be empathetic.** You are used to interacting with patients in a generous, thoughtful way. Keep doing it! Be aware of your patients' concerns and worries.
- **Prep your patients.** If possible, let them know you'll be asking about family history in advance so they can come prepared.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Family is a topic that can inspire conversation. Listen to stories about the family's health. You can learn a lot!
- **Avoid technical jargon.** Medical terminology can be confusing and scary when it's unfamiliar. Ask questions in a way that is easy to understand.

If you and your patient still feel uneasy, explain why a family is so important for your patient's health. A little bit of understanding can go a long way toward open communication.



When you talk with patients about their family health history, there's a ripple effect.

A conversation with a health care provider can stimulate and inspire conversations between patients and their families at home. Gathering a family history promotes communication and good health beyond a single patient.