

All in the Family

By Suze Hargraves

My dad was a man of few words. He had even less to share when it came to his family history. If you asked him about the health history on his side of the family he'd shrug and say, "They died." His other favorite line was "Old Marines never die. We go to hell and take over." As you can see, he wasn't the type of guy to discuss the delicate intricacies of wellness. Although my dad did his best by his family, his lack of communication about his family's health history has left a major gap for future generations.

Health history is valuable information to have and to share with your healthcare provider. Not everything you have or don't have has to do with genetics, but knowing the past can help you take proactive steps toward a healthier life. Mayo Clinic gives these reasons to document your family health history:

- Assess your risk of certain diseases
- Recommend treatment or changes in diet or lifestyle to reduce the risk of disease
- Determine which diagnostic tests is needed
- Determine the type and frequency of screening tests
- Determine whether you or family members should get a specific genetic test
- Identify a condition that might not otherwise be considered
- Identify other family members who are at risk of developing a certain disease
- Assess your risk of passing conditions on to your children

Getting family health information can be tricky. Some people in your family may be more than willing to discuss what they know for hours on end, but others might be more closemouthed. Keep your questions respectful, to the point and listen to the answers patiently. A digital recorder can save you a lot of writing. Here is a list of basic information to compile on each blood relative as recommended by The Mayo Clinic:

- Sex, date of birth, ethnicity
- Diseases or other medical conditions such as
 - Cancer, Heart disease, Diabetes, Dementia, Asthma, Arthritis, Mental illness, High blood pressure or high cholesterol, Stroke, Kidney disease, Alcoholism or other substance abuse, Vision or hearing loss, Learning disabilities, Mental retardation, Miscarriage, stillbirth, birth defects or infertility
- Age when disease was diagnosed (if applicable)
- Diet, exercise habits, smoking habits or history of weight problems
- For deceased relatives, age at the time of death and cause of death

Compiling your family's medical history is a big project. You'll be required to ask questions that some might find offensive. If a person is reacting negatively to your questions stop asking. They may or may not come back to you at a later date, but regardless of the project's importance to whole family, the individual's right to privacy must be respected.

When it comes to your health, keep it in the family. Add a family health history to your clan's documentation and help ensure the health of your family for generations to come.

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