

# Panning for a Healthy Future

The Importance of Family Health History  
for the African American Community



## Family Health History:

How to Collect It, Use It, and Share It

Includes a form to get you started in  
collecting your family health history

**Discover How Your Genes  
and Your Environment  
Can Affect Your Health  
and what you can do**

## A Must Read:

"Knowing My  
Family Health History  
Saved My Life"

# Understanding Family Health History

**W**hat is Family? Family is a group of related persons sharing physical, social and/or biological characteristics. Your values, social and religious tradition, even cooking recipes, and your genes are passed down to you from your parents, grandparents, and those who came before them. Just as you share so much of who you are with your parents and grandparents, your health can be a product of your family history. This is why knowing your family health history is so very important.

**Family health history** is information about your present and past health, living environments, dietary, and other personal habits as well as those of your extended family.

## Knowing your family health history:

- May provide clues to the future of your personal health, and may also be used to predict the health of future generations;
- Helps you better understand why you may be affected by certain diseases or other health problems;
- Helps you take better control of your everyday health and well being.

Family health history should be shared with all family members and given to children and other younger relatives. This helps everyone to better understand their current health and their future risk for getting diseases that run in your family.

This booklet teaches families how to collect their health information and share it with their relatives and health care providers. **You can use it to get your family together and share information that might save someone's life.**



"I have educated myself about the problems caused by lifestyle and diet [and because of this] I have made personal changes."

**Ray**, Washington, D.C.

# How to Collect Your Family Health History

"Knowing my family history has made me more proactive in taking measures to minimize the possibilities of diabetes and hypertension."

**Maria**, South Carolina



**M**any families pass down their memories through pictures, video recordings, and storytelling. Saving these treasures is an important way to remember people and places, and how things have changed. While keeping these tokens is important, it may be even more important to gather together and write down the facts of your family's health history.

Most families have a person who keeps track of birthdays, where people live, family events, and deaths. These family members, called **historians**, may be able to remember all of the information they have collected, or they may have felt it wise to have written it down in some place safe. Family health history information should always be written down.

## Tips for Collecting Family Health Information:

- Ask questions and keep a record of the diseases or other physical conditions that your close relatives (parents, children, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents) may have or have had. Be especially careful to record the diseases or conditions from which your relatives passed away by looking over death certificates and family medical records if possible.
- Collect information on at least three generations (you, your parents, and your grandparents).
- Collect information on all your relatives, not just the ones with major health conditions.

## Points to Remember:

- Some relatives may find it difficult to talk about their own health conditions, or about diseases in the family.
  - You may first wish to ask if it will be okay to ask these questions, because some relatives may not want to talk about their family health history. Relatives may appreciate it if you take time during family events such as birthday parties, baptisms, and family reunions to describe your family health history project, and seek out family volunteers who will help to answer your questions.
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# Information to Collect About Each Relative

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Name and relationship to you</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ethnicity</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Date of birth</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Health problems (including mental health problems)             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The name of the disease if known, and if not known, then list the symptoms</li> <li>• Age when each health problem began</li> <li>• How the health problem is/was treated</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Place of birth and other places they have lived</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lifestyle habits             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foods he or she eats</li> <li>• Non-smoker or smoker - if smoker, how often and how many years</li> <li>• Any exercise - if yes, how often (number or times per day or week)</li> <li>• Occupation or job</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> For relatives that have passed away             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age at time of death</li> <li>• Cause of death</li> <li>• If the cause of death is unknown, list any signs of illness</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
|---|---|

Use the insert in this booklet to start your family health history tree and share it with your family.

## What you can do:

- Spread the word to your relatives, friends, and co-workers about the importance of knowing your family health history.
- Form a group at your place of worship to promote healthy lifestyle choices such as walking and healthy eating.
- Keep your family health history information in a safe, private place, secure from potential damage or loss.
- Update your family health history information every couple of years at family get-togethers.
- Share a copy of your family health history with your doctor who may find it helpful in caring for your health.
- If you have questions or concerns about your family health history, talk to a genetic counselor.

A **genetic counselor** can give you specific information on diseases and conditions that may run in your family and help you understand more about these diseases. For more information, go to [www.myfamilies.org](http://www.myfamilies.org) or call 1-866-455-0501.



"I learned through family discussions that hypertension, diabetes, and prostate cancer ran in my family."

**Marcus**, Washington, D.C.

# "Knowing My Family Health History Saved My Life" A Personal Story

**M**s. Jackson,\* a retired African American woman residing in the Washington, D.C. area, began researching her family history as a curious little girl when she inquired about her great-grandmother's picture on the wall. As an adult, she decided to dig deeper into the past of both sides of her family. Ms. Jackson learned that her family had a history of heart disease for generations. Here, she tells her story of how she survived heart disease by knowing about her family health history. (\*Her name has been changed to protect her privacy.)

## **Q: How did you start researching your family health history?**

A: I knew my grandmother died in her 70's of heart disease. My dad died of the same thing at 42. As I started to gather death certificates, I found many listed heart disease and stroke as the cause of death on both sides of the family. At the time, I wasn't thinking about genetics. But it struck me as strange that everyone died of the same thing.

## **Q: When did you begin to have health problems?**

A: I started having problems with my blood pressure when I was in my early 20's. From that point on, I told my doctor about my family history on both sides of my family. Because I gave her this information, she tailored my treatment. She treated me for hypertension. Had I not known a lot about my family health history, she may have taken a different approach.

## **Q: How did knowing your family health history save your life?**

A: As a part of my treatment, my doctor scheduled me for stress tests every so often. On one occasion, when I went into her office for my regular checkup, she was going through my chart and said, "I think it is about time for you to have a stress test. I want you to go and have it done soon." I had a stress test before, so I didn't think

of it as a big deal.

I was unusually exhausted during the test. When I received my results, my cardiologist



showed me where I had a blockage. I knew about certain things they could do like inserting stents and bypass surgery. My mother's relatives had these procedures done, so they were familiar to me. Two weeks later, I was on an operating table having open heart bypass surgery.

When I went back to see my doctor and she looked at my stress test results, she mentioned the term "myocardial infarction." I told her, "Wait a minute, are you trying to say I had a heart attack?!" She said, "Yes."

At the time, I had no idea I was having a heart attack. What I do realize, looking back, is that I had gained more weight than usual. When I would come upstairs from the basement with a laundry basket, I would feel a little winded, but I put it off, telling myself that I really need to lose weight. Then, I remember I had a strange, cool sensation in the top part of my chest. Now, I am more educated about women's heart attack symptoms. I know the signs.

## **Q: How did you share the information you learned about your family's health?**

A: I told all my relatives that they should be more aware of what they are doing and what they are eating. Our parents didn't know any better, so we ate a lot of fatty, fried foods. But now, the younger generation can train their kids to eat healthier. Heart disease changes your whole life. Would I love to eat what I want? Absolutely. I love to eat. But I believe an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.



"Heart disease was traced back to my grandfather ... My mother, brothers, and I suffer from heart disease. It has changed my outlook on life."

**Thomas**, Washington, D.C.

## Genes, Environment & Health: How are they related?

### Your Genes: The “Stuff” You Are Made Of

Has someone ever said to you, “It’s in your genes?” They were probably talking about a physical feature, personality trait, talent, or illness that you share with other members of your family.

**Genes** are biological instructions that you receive from your parents that guide your growth and development. They influence the way you look as well as how your body works on the inside. This is why traits, such as height, eye color, and certain diseases like cancer can also be passed along in a family. **Genetics** is the study of genes and heredity. **Heredity** is the passing of genetic information and traits from parents to children. You inherit your genes from *both* your parents.

### Your Environment: Where You Go and What You Do

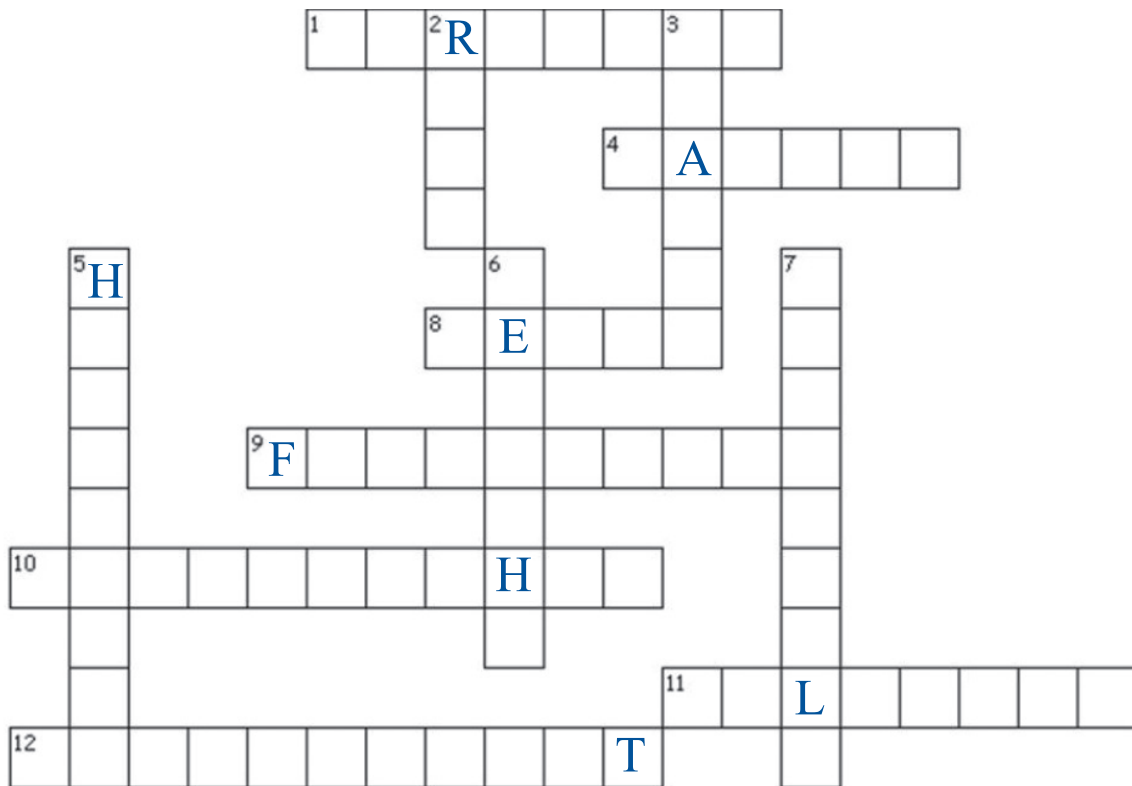
Your **environment** consists of all of the things you come into contact with on a daily basis. Your environment and way of life can affect your risk for getting certain diseases. It is important to know what factors in your environment increase your disease risks so that you can take steps to reduce those risks. You can change unhealthy habits such as eating too much fast food or smoking, to help you live longer and feel better.

### Your Health: Connecting Genes and Environment

An illness like **sickle cell disease** is a genetic disease that can occur when both parents carry the sickle cell trait, or when one parent has sickle cell anemia and the other parent carries the sickle cell trait. More common health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer involve genes, but may also be caused by a number of factors that are influenced by how and where you live. Family members sometimes get the same diseases because they share their genes and environment. We do not fully understand how genes and the environment interact to cause disease.

**Until more is understood about gene-environment interactions, knowing about your family health history is the best way to learn about and reduce your risk for diseases that run in your family.**

# Crossword Puzzle



## Across

- The passing of genes from one generation to the next.
- A group of related persons sharing biological, physical, and social characteristics.
- Biological instructions you receive from your parents.
- A diagram including all your relatives to show your family history (two words).
- Your mother's mother is your \_\_\_\_\_.
- A person connected to another person by blood.
- This consists of all the things you come in contact with on a daily basis.

## Down

- Chance of getting a disease over a certain period of time.
- Qualities you inherit from your parents.
- The person who keeps track of birthdays, where people live, family events, and deaths.
- Regular exercise promotes a \_\_\_\_\_ lifestyle.
- A way of living for an individual or group.

### ANSWERS

DOWN  
2. Risk  
3. Traits

5. Historian  
6. Healthy  
7. Lifestyle

ACROSS  
1. Heredity  
4. Family

8. Genes  
9. Family Tree  
10. Grandmother

11. Relative  
12. Environment



Special thanks to community members of the Greater Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area.

For more information on family health history, please visit  
The National Human Genome Center at Howard University  
Community Genetics Education Network website

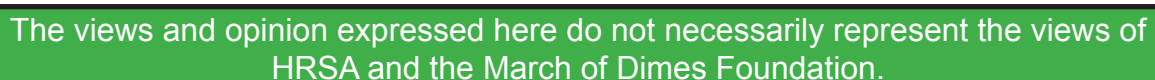
[www.myfamilies.org](http://www.myfamilies.org)

**National Human Genome Center  
Howard University College of Medicine  
2401 Georgia Avenue, NW  
Cancer Center Building, Room 615  
Washington, D.C. 20060**

**Note:** This booklet was developed for use in a workshop titled, *Family Health History, Genetics, and Your Health: Educating the African American Family*. There is also a booklet titled, *“Race,” Genetics, and Health*. If you are interested in a workshop, please contact us.

The information in this booklet is meant for educational purposes only. This booklet does not replace the advice of a medical professional and cannot replace the benefits of a doctor-patient relationship. Please contact your doctor if you need medical care or advice.

This project is supported by grant U33MC00157 from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Genetics Services Branch to the March of Dimes Foundation. Partners of the Community Genetics Education Network (CGEN) include HRSA, March of Dimes Foundation, Dominican Women’s Development Center, Charles B. Wang Community Health Center, Genetic Science Learning Center at University of Utah, Utah Department of Health, the National Human Genome Center and Department of Community and Family Medicine at Howard University, and the University of Illinois at Chicago - Midwest Latino Health Research, Training & Policy Center.



The views and opinion expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of HRSA and the March of Dimes Foundation.