

Family History in the Genetics Era

Personalized medicine utilizing genetic information and family history is transforming healthcare. Advances in genetics are forcing medical practitioners to re-emphasize the role of family history.

We all can list physical traits or behaviors that we inherited from our parents, but risks for certain common diseases can also be inherited. Your family medical history has become an important tool in assessing your risk for developing certain diseases in your lifetime. Not only do families share common genes, they often share an environment and particular behaviors which could also place individuals at increased risk for illness and chronic diseases. Conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer have all been linked to genetic and environmental factors. Knowing your family history can serve as a “screening” tool in determining whether you are at an increased risk for developing the diseases that may be present in your family. The completion of the Human Genome Project has set the stage for personalized medicine. Coalitions are building between academic research centers, pharmaceutical companies, emerging biotech companies, and clinical care centers to bring medical innovation to diagnosis and disease prevention.

The first step in staying well is to examine your family history with the guidance of your physician or a specially trained genetic counselor. The year 2004 marked an initiative to make the public aware of the importance of family history as a risk factor for disease. A 2004 Health Styles survey analyzed by the CDC indicated that more than two thirds of those surveyed had yet to collect an accurate family history, although over 96% of respondents recognized its importance in monitoring their own health. The Department of Health and Human Services established Thanksgiving Day 2004 as National Family History Day, encouraging relatives who gather together to celebrate the holiday to also share valuable information about their family’s health history. For more information on the CDC family history initiative, visit www.cdc.gov/genomics/activities/famhx.htm.

Advances in medical genetics have made physicians and other health care professionals increasingly aware of the importance of family history in determining risks for common diseases. However, there are often time constraints during appointments, preventing detailed information from being collected. Individuals can be advocates for their own health by collecting family history information. They can speak with family members and/or review medical records, family trees, family photos, family bibles, journals, and scrapbooks. Information on how to collect family history may be found at <http://www.nsgc.org/consumer/familytree/index.asp>. It is important to include three generations when collecting your family history, including your children, parents, siblings, nieces/nephews, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Record all information collected on each relative, regardless of whether it is a medical diagnosis. For instance, sometimes behavioral characteristics can be important in determining risks for disease. For a helpful family history collection tool, visit www.hhs.gov/familyhistory.

Once you have collected information on your family history, you should review the information with your doctor or meet with a genetic professional, if you are concerned about health conditions identified in your family. Genetic counselors are all trained professionals that can assist you and your doctor in fully appreciating your risks and the genetic testing that may be available. They may also be able to identify support groups or provide more information regarding the health concerns in your family.

It will be important for you to update your family history as it changes over time. If new medical information is discovered, share the new family history with your primary care provider so that your own health can be properly monitored. For more information about genetics specialists, visit www.NYSgeneticcounselors.org. For more information about clinical genetic services in NYS, you can contact Ferre Institute at 1.888.483.3773.

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