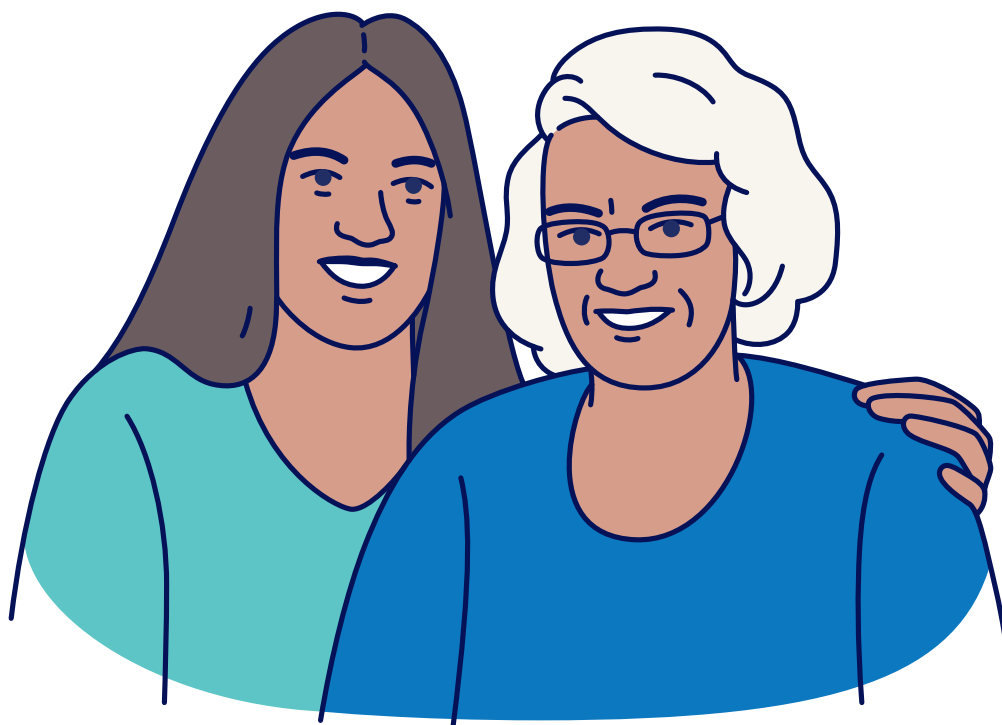


Talk With Your Family!

Your Guide to Learning Your Family Health History



Memorial Sloan Kettering
Cancer Center

www.msk.org

Last revised: January 2026

What is a family health history?

Your family health history is a list of health problems in your family. It also includes other information about you and your family members, such as:

- Your race and ethnicity.
- Where you live.
- What you do for work.
- Habits that can affect your health.

This information is included in your family history because both your genes and your day-to-day world impacts your health. You can learn about health problems you may inherit (passed to you from your parents) by knowing:

- Where your family comes from
- How your family lives, works, and plays.

For example, if you are from an Ashkenazi Jewish background you may have mutations or variants (changes) in the BRCA gene. This may raise your risk of getting some cancers, such as breast, prostate, pancreatic, and ovarian cancer.

Why is knowing your family health history important?

Knowing your family health history can help you be healthy! It's a way to learn about your risks for health problems. Some health problems are passed from parent to child.

Others can be from things you share with your family members, like the foods you eat and where you live.

You and your family have a lot of things in common. Some you can see on the outside, such as the same eye color, height, and skin tone. Others you can't see, such as your genes and blood type. Collecting your family history helps you discover similarities you can't see that may affect your health.

What health information should I collect?

Ask family members if they have ever been told they had any of these health problems:

- Alzheimer's disease
- Asthma
- Cancer
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (COPD)
- Cystic fibrosis
- Depression or anxiety
- Diabetes (Type 1 and Type 2)
- Genetic conditions
- Heart problems
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Lynch Syndrome
- Mental health conditions
- Multiple endocrine neoplasia syndromes
- Obesity
- Parkinson's disease
- Polyps
- Sickle cell disease
- Stroke

“Your family health history is important information to share with your healthcare team. It will help them know if you or your children need special care. Here at MSK, we depend on family health histories to know if you and your children need screening or genetic testing. This can help us find health problems and risks for cancer early on when they can be treated or prevented.”

Victoria Groner
Associate Genetics
Counselor, MSK

8 steps to make your family health history

- 1**

Begin your family health history by making a family tree.

This is a picture of the relationships between people in your family.

Start with the names of people who are most closely related to you:

 - Yourself
 - Your grandparents
 - Your parents
 - Your siblings
 - Your children

Then, you can add the names of:

 - Your half-siblings
 - Your nieces and nephews
 - Your aunts and uncles
 - Your cousins
- 2**

Find out if there is a person who keeps your family's records and enjoys telling stories about the family.

Your family members can be great sources of information. Family gatherings, in-person or online, are a chance to talk about your family members' lives and their health.
- 3**

Start by sharing why you want to collect the family health history.

When people understand your reason, they may be more interested in helping.
- 4**

Ask your family members where, when, and how they would like to talk.

This will help people feel comfortable. For example, a family member may prefer a phone call or meeting face-to-face at their home. Other people enjoy using video on their computer or smartphone.
- 5**

Respect people's privacy.

It's okay if some people do not want to talk about their health.
- 6**

Ask short, open-ended questions that avoid "yes" or "no" answers.

Open-ended questions can help you have a more meaningful conversation.
- 7**

Let people describe what they know in their own words.

People may not know the right name for someone's health condition. But, they may be able to tell you about symptoms and how it made the person feel.
- 8**

Show that you care and be thankful.

Talking about health and family history can be hard for some people. Thank them for sharing their personal information with you.

Ideas for questions to ask your family

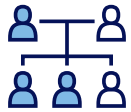
Try these open-ended questions to start the conversation. You may learn new facts, like patterns of health problems. You could even discover the impact your family's environment, lifestyle, and social history had on their health.



What do you know about where our family is from?



What kinds of jobs have people in our family had?



Are there health problems people in the family have in common?



Is there a history of cancer in our family?



Did you have any health problems or illnesses as a child that needed medical care?



Have you or any of our family members been screened or had genetic testing done for a health condition?



Tell me about the foods the family typically eats?



Does anyone in the family smoke or use tobacco, or have they in the past?



What special meals and holidays do you remember celebrating as a child?



I understand this topic can be difficult to talk about. Can you share if anyone in our family had a history of alcohol or drug use?

What if I do not know my family?

If you don't know your biological family, start your family health history with yourself. You can fill in the information you are missing over time as you learn more.

If you are adopted, it's important to learn about the health of your birth parents. Talk with your adoptive parents or reach out to the agency they worked with.

Here are some more ways to find information if you do not know your family:

- Research online with a genealogy website, your local library archives, or the National Archives.
 - You can find census records, news articles, birth announcements, and obituaries.
- Request vital records from your state or local government offices.
 - Birth, marriage, and death certificates are all examples of vital records.

We have a resource offering tips on finding information you can trust online at:

www.mskcc.org/trusted-info

Ready to get started?

After talking with your family members about health problems and other information, you can start creating your family health history.

At the end of this booklet you will find pages to write down your family tree and health history. Once it is filled out, you can keep it in a safe place so you can share it with your healthcare providers, your children, and other family members.



Guide to making your family health history

Start your family health history

Make a family tree with all the names of family members you know. Use a pen, pencil, or a highlighter to circle the family members you are related to by blood.

Yourself:			
Grandparents:	Parents:	Siblings:	Children:
Half-Siblings:	Nieces and Nephews:	Aunts and Uncles:	Cousins:

Talk about your family health history

In your own words, write down your reason for collecting your family health history:

Write down some other open-ended questions you might want to ask:

Write down your family health history

Include important dates like birthdays, date of passing (death), and if you know how old a family member was when they were diagnosed with a health problem. Keep this in a safe place to share with your healthcare providers and family members.

Name	Important dates
Their health history	
Lifestyle and environment factors	

Name	Important dates
Their health history	
Lifestyle and environment factors	
Name	Important dates
Their health history	
Lifestyle and environment factors	
Name	Important dates
Their health history	
Lifestyle and environment factors	
Name	Important dates
Their health history	
Lifestyle and environment factors	