

Give the Gift of Health

GATHERING YOUR FAMILY MEDICAL HISTORY MAY HELP YOU—AND YOUR RELATIVES—STAY WELL FOR LIFE.

by Jane Bianchi

One of the best ways you can help yourself *and* future generations live longer is to create a medical history. Here's why: If you discover that a certain disease runs in your family, you can immediately take measures to lower your risk and start getting screened sooner (the earlier you catch a health problem, the easier it is to treat). The completed project also makes a great present for others, so start compiling your family's health legacy using these four simple steps.

Step 1: CREATE AN INTERVIEW LIST

The people who affect your risk the most are your first-degree relatives, such as your parents, siblings and children. You share the most genes and habits with them, so approach them first. For the second round, interview your grandparents, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, cousins, great-aunts and -uncles and any half-siblings. If you can go beyond that (great-grandparents, for instance), do so.

Step 2: ASK THE KEY QUESTIONS

The most important one: Do you currently have or have you ever had any diseases or health conditions? The next is: How old were you when it developed? Age matters. For example, if your mom had breast cancer at 40 (as opposed to 70), it's more likely that there's a genetic link to breast cancer in your family. Look out for common problems that can be life-threatening, such as heart attack, cancer and type 2 diabetes.

Step 3: DIG DEEPER

Try to pinpoint the cause of a disease. For instance, if a person reveals that he has lung cancer, ask him if he smokes, because if he doesn't, it's more likely there's a genetic link. And if possible, find out as many details as you can about the circumstances and timing surrounding family members who have died. As you go along, be sure to write down all of the information that you uncover.



Thanksgiving is a great time to talk to relatives about health history because extended family members are all in one place."

Step 4: COMBINE AND SHARE

Using pen and paper or an online tool (see box, right), map out the information so it looks like a family tree. If you have a large family, put one generation on one piece of paper, and use separate sheets for other generations. Next to each family member's name, write his or her date of birth, date of death and any health problems. When your tree is finished, share it with your relatives and your doctor—and update it every few years.

SOURCES: Robin L. Bennett, codirector, genetic medicine clinics, University of Washington School of Medicine, and author, *The Practical Guide to the Genetic Family History*. Carol Daus, author, *Past Imperfect: How Tracing Your Family Medical History Can Save Your Life*. Rebecca Nagy, MS, CGC, president, National Society of Genetic Counselors.

OPPOSITE PAGE AND THIS PAGE, TOP: GETTY (2)



(FROM LEFT) **ARYAN BOCQUET, 35, AND ARELLE HUGHES, 32** "Getting medical information from the men in our family is challenging. Health concerns are not as openly talked about or acknowledged by men, which is frustrating."

Dr. Carmona says: Stress the goal: Sharing information will help you and future generations stay healthy. Mix questions about health with those having to do with your family's immigration story, so relatives are less intimidated. Also, chat with role models in their communities—maybe your grandfather trusts a faith leader. If these people echo the importance of your mission, it might persuade the men to talk.

EXPERT SOLUTIONS

Family medical histories are a big project and Latinas may face specific cultural challenges. Here, three women share their roadblocks, and Richard Carmona, MD, MPH, former Surgeon General of the U.S., offers practical solutions.



KATINA ROJAS JOY, 42 "My relatives live in a rural town in Puerto Rico, where Wi-Fi isn't widely available and not everyone has cell phones."

Dr. Carmona says: If you're not able to visit or call, designate a point person. Find a cousin or an aunt in your home country who is willing to take charge of gathering information from relatives who live there, then have them either email it—by visiting a library with free Internet access—or send it to you in a letter.



DEANNA NIKIRK, 30 "I don't talk to my grandmother often since her English is broken and my Spanish is rusty. It's difficult to discuss anything—so it would be especially tough to talk to her about medical stuff."

Dr. Carmona says: A bilingual family member might help you translate, or you may be able to find an interpreter at a large medical center, community center or library. Find a translator near you by searching atanet.org, the American Translators Association site.

Easy-to-use tools

Need a little help? Use one of these free online options to put together your medical history:

- 1. familyhistory.hhs.gov**
This site uses a fill-in-the-blanks format.
- 2. familyhealthlink.osumc.edu**
This tool also helps assess your risk for cancer and heart disease.
- 3. www.nsgc.org/familytree**
Learn how to map out your family tree in a graphic way that's easy to read.