

# GeneScene

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The official newsletter of the Guilford Genomic Medicine Initiative (GGMI)

## Knowing Your Family History Could Save Your Life!

### Did you know...

- Ninety-six percent of Americans think that family history is important, but only a third have tried to collect and record their family's health history.
- More than 100 million Americans can find evidence linking them to one or more of the 43 U.S. presidents.
- Twenty percent of the world's population is married to a first cousin.



While you gather with your family this holiday season, make it a point to find out about your family's health history. Family history is one of the best ways to learn about your risk to develop certain health conditions.

Complex common diseases, such as diabetes, stroke, heart disease and cancer, can run in families. If your family members have one of these diseases, you may have a higher chance of getting that disease yourself.

A family health history is a record of your family members and any diseases they have had.

Once you have collected information about diseases that affect your relatives, share the information with your doctor. Your chance of getting a disease is based on:

- The number of family members with the same or similar disease
- How closely related you are to family members with disease
- Your family members' health, habits, and exposures
- Your personal health history

Your doctor may recommend more frequent screening for certain diseases or adopting healthier habits. Many conditions can be avoided entirely, delayed or treated early if you know you are at risk.

Become your family's health historian. Update your family history over the years and share it with other family members. Not only will you be helping yourself, you will be helping your children and other family members lead a healthier life!

**"Families are like fudge... mostly sweet with a few nuts."**

—author unknown



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[www.genomic-medicine.org](http://www.genomic-medicine.org)

## How can I start collecting my family's health history?

First, explain to your family why family history is so important (you can show them this newsletter!). Next, start asking each of your blood relatives about their history of health problems.

You should try to collect information not only on close relatives, like your children, brothers/sisters and parents, but also on more distant relatives, such as your first cousins, aunts/uncles, nieces/nephews and grandparents.

Here is a checklist to help you remember what information to write down and share with your doctor:

- ✓ **Current Ages** — Of all family members listed above.
  - ✓ **Gender** — Of all family members listed above.
  - ✓ **Age at Death** — If no longer living.
  - ✓ **Cause of Death** — If no longer living.
  - ✓ **Health Status** — Healthy or a history of health problems.
  - ✓ **Type of Disease** — List any known diseases in each family member listed above.
  - ✓ **Age When Disease Was Diagnosed**
- ✓ **Ethnic Background** — Countries your family came from/ancestry.
  - ✓ **Health Habits & Environmental Exposures** — Health habits and things a family member may have been exposed to can include:
    - Hormone replacement therapy
    - Smoking, drinking alcohol, or drug use
    - Living or working near a chemical or other type of plant
    - Diet, exercise, and weight control
    - For women, age at the time of her first period, age when she had her first child, or age at menopause

You should try to get this information for all of your family members listed above. You may also want to collect medical records on family members who have passed away.

Sharing this information with your doctor can help him/her look for patterns in your family health history that may suggest that you have a higher chance for getting a disease.



### On the Web...

**Guilford Genomic Medicine Initiative**  
[www.genomic-medicine.org](http://www.genomic-medicine.org)

**U.S. Surgeon General's Family History Initiative**  
[www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/](http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/)

**National Office of Public Health Genomics at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**  
[www.cdc.gov/genomics/](http://www.cdc.gov/genomics/)