

## THE U.S. SURGEON GENERAL'S FAMILY HISTORY INITIATIVE

# BEFORE YOU START

### *Gathering What You Need To Create Your Own Family Health Portrait*

Knowing your family's health history can save your life and the lives of those you love. Tracing the illnesses suffered by your parents, grandparents and other relatives can help your doctor predict the disorders to which you may be at risk and take action to keep you and your family healthy. To help you organize your family's health information, the U.S. Surgeon General has developed an online tool called My Family Health Portrait, which is available at <https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/>.

Before you start using this tool, you will need to talk with your family members to gather more details about their health histories. Here are some suggestions on how to plan and conduct those important conversations.

### *Getting Ready to Talk*

#### **Make a list of relatives.**

Write down the names of the blood relatives that you need to include in your family health history. The most important relatives to talk to are your parents, your brothers and sisters, and your children. Next should be grandparents, uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews, and any half-brothers or half-sisters. It is also helpful to talk to great uncles and great aunts, as well as cousins.

#### **Prepare your questions.**

Write out your questions ahead of time because it will help you to focus your discussion.

Among the questions to ask are:

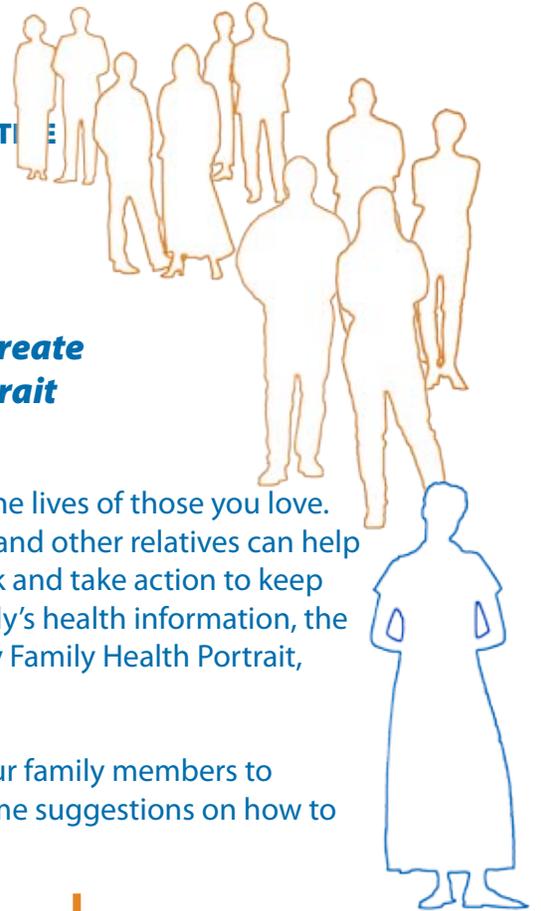
- Do you have any chronic illnesses, such as heart disease, high blood pressure or diabetes?
- Have you had any other serious illnesses, such as cancer or stroke?
- How old were you when you developed these illnesses?
- Have you or your partner had any difficulties with pregnancies, such as miscarriages?
- What medications are you currently taking?

Also ask questions about other relatives, both living and deceased, such as:

- What is our family's ancestry - what country did we come from? Has anyone in the family had learning or developmental disabilities? What illnesses did our late grandparents have?
- How old were they when they died? What caused their deaths?

#### **Find a good time to talk.**

Consider talking with your relatives when your family is together in a relaxed setting. A good time may be at reunions, cookouts or holidays, such as Thanksgiving. If it's not possible to talk to your relatives in person, you can also talk with them over the telephone, or send them questions by mail or e-mail.



## **During Your Talks**

### **Explain to your relatives what you are doing.**

Begin your conversation by explaining that learning more about your family health history can help save lives. Let your relatives know that the information they share about their individual health histories will help you create a Family Health Portrait that will benefit the entire family.

### **Keep a record.**

Remember to bring along a pencil and paper or a tape recorder to keep track of what your relatives tell you. That way you will have their health information handy when you sit down to create My Family Health Portrait online or to fill out the paper version.

### **Ask one question at a time.**

It will be easier for your relatives to provide you with useful information if you keep your questions short and to the point. If you need more details, ask follow-up questions such as “why,” “how” or “when.” Try to get as much specific information as possible.

For example, if an uncle tells you he has heart disease, ask follow-up questions to find out when he developed the disease, if he had a heart attack and whether he underwent surgery. You would also want to find out whether he has any other medical problems, such as high cholesterol or high blood pressure, and what medications he may be taking, such as cholesterol-lowering drugs.

### **Respect your relatives’ feelings.**

Some family members may not want to share all or certain parts of their health information. This can be a difficult situation. Be sensitive to their feelings, and let them know that whatever information they can provide will be helpful.

## **After Your Talks**

### **Take one step at a time.**

If during your talks, you find out about a serious health problem that you didn’t know existed in your family, don’t panic. Move ahead with creating your Family Health Portrait. Then, take your Family Health Portrait to your health care provider, who can help you assess and understand what the information means for the health of you and your family.

### **Filling in the gaps.**

For relatives who are deceased or for whom you have incomplete health information, try asking other relatives or health care providers for information about their health histories. Whenever possible, get copies of medical records, birth and death certificates to document the type of health condition diagnosed in yourself or your relatives.

### **Keep your family’s health history up-to-date.**

As children are born and family members develop illnesses, remember to add that information to your Family Health Portrait. It may take a little time and effort, but you will be creating a lasting legacy that will improve the health of your family for generations to come.