



American College of Medical Genetics

Medical Genetics: Translating Genes Into Health™

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Myths and Facts About Family Health History: American College of Medical Genetics Encourages Families to Gather Family Health History Information on National Family History Day, Thanksgiving 2008

BETHESDA, MD –NOVEMBER 1, 2008 – This Thanksgiving is the fifth annual National Family History Day, as declared by the U.S. Surgeon General. The American College of Medical Genetics (ACMG) encourages every American to know their family medical history and if they haven't already gathered this potentially life-saving information, to "start the conversation" about family medical history this Thanksgiving holiday, often the only time when extended family is gathered together. "Be proactive! Begin preparing now to be an active participant in the personalized medicine movement by learning and recording your family health history," says Judith Benkendorf, MS, CGC, Project Manager at the American College of Medical Genetics. To help the public better understand Family Health History, ACMG has developed the following Myths and Facts:

1. Myth: It's way too complicated for me to try to gather my family health history. I'm too busy and it would take too much time.

Fact: Family history information can be collected over time. Begin by writing down your own health history and then that of your closest relatives (your parents, brothers, sisters and children), working out to your more distant relatives. As you identify missing information, make a list of what you need and have other family members assist you. A family health history is a living document. It is never done, but rather will continue to grow over time. The most important step is just getting started. Simple tools to assist with this process are listed below.

2. Myth: I'm adopted and have no information about my biological family. Therefore, recording a family health history does not apply to me.

Fact: This is a common concern for people who were adopted and is one reason why people seek a consultation with a geneticist or genetic coun

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selor. The longer ago you were adopted, the less likely it is that you will be able to retrieve much health history information on your biological family. But, as you have your own family, it is important that you document your personal health history to leave behind for them. In 2-3 generations the fact that you were adopted will have little to no impact on the quality of the family health information available to your descendants. Also, if you are thinking about becoming an adoptive parent, you should try to collect whatever family medical history is allowed in your state.

3. Myth: With all the DNA tests now available, wouldn't it just be better to take a DNA test and find out what diseases I'm "going to get?"

Fact: DNA tests are most often ordered and best interpreted in the context of family health history and with the support and guidance of a healthcare professional. Pairing DNA testing with family history can save health care dollars and better direct services. Even in our "high tech" world, family history remains the most sensitive genetic test known.

4. Myth: If I do not "favor" the side of my family that has the health problems "running in" it, I do not need to worry about collecting and recording my family history.

Fact: All people inherit 50% of their genes from each parent. Just because you look or act much more like one side of your family, it does not lessen your chances of inheriting genes for preventable health problems from your other parent.

Why is family health history so important? Advances in genetics research mean that knowing your family's medical history can help your healthcare provider to predict conditions for which you and your blood relatives may be at risk and to help you to take actions to minimize risks and protect your health.

"Americans realize that their family medical history is important. However, with daily life demands and families often separated by many miles, most of us have not gathered what could be the most important genetics tool for protecting our health – our family health history," says Joe Leigh Simpson, MD, FACMG, president of the American College of Medical Genetics (ACMG). "With so much discussion about genetic testing in the news, ACMG wants to remind people that there is an extremely useful, noninvasive, no-cost genetics test...knowing your family medical history, especially of your near relatives."

"On Thanksgiving Day many families are gathered under one roof," said Michael S. Watson, PhD, FACMG, Executive Director of the ACMG. "Some families may already be collecting genealogic information but haven't gathered details about health history such as diseases that 'run in the family'. If concerns are identified after families initiate this important conversation, they should be discussed with a healthcare provider, who can make a referral to a medical genetics professional such as a board certified Medical Geneticist or board certified genetic counselor, if necessary."

For individuals seeking a genetics professional, the ACMG has compiled a free online tool: "Find a Genetics Professional" at www.acmg.net.

How You Can Get the Conversation Started About Family Health History:

You can discuss family health history by starting with questions like, “Are there any health problems that are known to run in our family? If so, what are these conditions, who has/had them and at what age were they diagnosed?” You may also want to talk privately with certain family members about potentially sensitive topics. You can find more sample questions on Family Health History on the ACMG website at: http://www.acmg.net/AM/Template.cfm?Section=News_Releases&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=1611

Tools and Resources:

There are a variety of easy-to-use tools in several languages available to help in compiling a family medical history including:

The U.S. Surgeon General’s Family History Initiative – My Health Portrait:
<http://familyhistory.hhs.gov/>

The U.S. Surgeon General’s Retrato de Salud de mi Familia (Spanish):
http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/download_spanish.html

Multilingual versions of the U.S. Surgeon General’s Family History Tool in Chinese, Polish, Spanish, French and Portuguese are available at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital National Family Health Initiative Website:
<http://www.brighamandwomens.org/FamilyHistory/PDFTools/FamilyHistoryTools.aspx>

Find a Genetic Counselor or Geneticist Near You: www.acmg.net

Frequently Asked Questions About Family Health History:
<http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/docs/FAQs.pdf>

Genetic Alliance Family Health History Resources: <http://geneticalliance.org/familyhealthhistory>

About the American College of Medical Genetics

Founded in 1991, the **American College of Medical Genetics** (www.acmg.net) advances the practice of medical genetics by providing education, resources and a voice for more than 1400 biochemical, clinical, cytogenetic, medical and molecular geneticists, genetic counselors and other health care professionals committed to the practice of medical genetics. ACMG’s activities include the development of laboratory and practice standards and guidelines, advocating for quality genetic services in health care and in public health, and promoting the development of methods to diagnose, treat and prevent genetic disease. *Genetics in Medicine*, published monthly, is the official ACMG peer-reviewed journal. ACMG’s website (www.acmg.net) offers a variety of resources including Policy Statements, Practice Guidelines, Educational Tools, and a Medical Geneticist Locator. The educational and public health programs of the American College of Medical Genetics are dependent upon charitable gifts from corporations, foundations, and individuals. The **American College of Medical Genetics Foundation** is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization dedicated to funding the College’s diverse efforts to translate genetic discoveries into health practices.