



# Cancer and Family Health History

## What is Cancer?

Cancer is a disease that occurs when cells in the body grow out of control. It can affect any organ tissue in the body. All cancers are caused by a change in one or more genes that control cell division. The cause of the change is not always known. Often it can be linked to exposures in the environment, like smoking.

Sometimes, the change occurs in a gene that is passed down from parent to child. Most cancers are caused by a combination of factors that are not always well understood.

## Why is Family History Important?

Most cancers happen in people without a known family history of cancer. But sometimes cancer is caused by a gene change and can run in families. Knowing what to look for can help you when you are looking into your family's health history.

### Look for these "red flags" in your family:

- A family member diagnosed with cancer before 50 years of age.
- Three or more relatives with cancer on one side of the family.
- Three or more generations affected with cancer.
- Any family member diagnosed with 2 or more primary cancers (for example, breast and ovarian).
- A male with breast cancer.
- Anyone with pancreatic cancer, ovarian cancer, or metastatic prostate cancer.



## What Can You Do?

**Know** your family history. Talk to your relatives and find out if anyone has had cancer. Write down the type of cancer people had and when they had it. Even though you can't change your family history, there are steps you can take that may prevent or delay the onset of disease.

### If you have a family history of cancer:

- Tell your health care provider.
- Ask if you would benefit from a formal risk assessment and/or genetic counseling.
- Ask what screenings are recommended based on your age and family history, then be sure to get them done.
- Get more physical activity.
- Eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables every day.
- Be tobacco-free — 3 in 10 cancer deaths from 2009 to 2013 were tobacco-related.
- Reduce consumption of or avoid alcohol.
- Keep a healthy weight.
- Protect your skin from the sun.

Cancer cannot always be prevented. But if detected early, there are many new and effective treatments. If you have been diagnosed with cancer, share your health history with family members. Encourage them to follow through with screenings and make healthy lifestyle choices to reduce their risk of cancer.

## For More Information

**MDHHS Cancer Genomics Program**

[www.Michigan.gov/HereditaryCancer](http://www.Michigan.gov/HereditaryCancer)

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

[www.cdc.gov/genomics/famhistory/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/genomics/famhistory/index.htm)

**National Cancer Institute**

[www.cancer.gov/cancertopics](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics)

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