

# Family History and Your Health



Cancer, diabetes and heart disease don't have to be a death sentence in Native American communities. Knowing and sharing your family history, along with early screening, may prevent or delay the onset of disease for you and your family members.

## Traditional Storytelling: Sharing a Message of Wellness

Your family holds you in honor and the highest esteem. When telling the stories of past generations and sharing your wisdom, be sure to include your health history. In this way, you can help your family members have a healthier future.

Family members share many of the same genes, lifestyles and environments – these are the factors that determine your health. Keep your identity present in the health of your family.

## What Stories Do You Tell?



Look for these signs when talking about your family's health history:

- ▶ A blood relative who had cancer before age 50
- ▶ Two or more blood relatives with the same or related cancers (example: breast and ovarian, colon and uterine) on one side of the family
- ▶ Two or more generations affected with cancer
- ▶ Any blood relative who had 2 or more separate cancers (example: breast and ovarian)
- ▶ A male blood relative with breast cancer
- ▶ Heart attacks before age 55 in a man or age 65 in a woman
- ▶ Sudden unexplained death under age 40
- ▶ Chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or osteoporosis

## What Can You Do?



### 1. Talk about it. Follow the oral tradition of storytelling.

- Let your family know that diseases like cancer, diabetes, and heart disease can run in families.
- Talk about where your family members lived, what they ate, and their life activities.
- Tell the stories about what health conditions are in your family and how old your family members were when they were diagnosed and/or when they walked on.

### 2. Listen. Ask. Write it down.

- Listen to the stories of your family members and Elders.
- Record your family's health history. To download a form to make a family tree, go to: <https://familyhistory.hhs.gov>.
- Update your family tree information as changes happen.
- Try to include information on at least 3 generations of family members.

### 3. Pass it on.

- Share the oral tradition of storytelling with your doctor.
- Ask whether you need to be screened for cancer, diabetes, and heart disease.
- Share what you learn from your doctor with your children and others in your family.



### For More Information

**MDHHS Cancer Genomics Program**  
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