

Share Your Health History This Season

(Courtesy Heartland Regional Genetics and Newborn Screening Collaborative, supported by a grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration)

You know you've got your grandmother's green eyes, but do you know you could also get her high blood pressure? We inherit many things from our families, including traits that could impair one of the most important things in life – our health.

Knowing your family's medical history can be crucial to maintaining your own good health.

Family health information can help your doctor determine your risk of disease and help you take action to stay healthy. Preventing and effectively treating conditions that can be passed down from family members – including diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and some types of cancer – can help you and your family live longer and healthier lives.

The summer season, typically the time for family reunions, is a good time to discuss your health history. While sharing family stories and time-honored traditions, take a few minutes to talk about health. Try to collect information about diseases and causes of death affecting at least three generations of family members. Share your collected family health history with other family members.

This information should be given to all health care providers to be included in your permanent medical file. It will help your doctor monitor your health and recommend lifestyle changes, medications and screenings that could greatly improve your quality of life.

A survey conducted in 2004 by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 96 percent of Americans believe that knowing their family medical history is vital to their health. However, the survey also showed that only one-third of Americans has attempted to gather and organize this important information.

Take time this year to discuss your family's health history. Create a medical family tree to identify health risks you and your family members may face in the years ahead so you can take steps now to prevent or reduce the impact of those conditions. To encourage people to learn more about their family health history, the U.S. Surgeon General proclaimed Thanksgiving Day as Family History Day. But any time your family gathers together is a good time to record your family health history.

To help you get started, the Heartland Regional Genetics and Newborn Screening Collaborative has prepared a family history toolkit to assist you in compiling the appropriate information. The toolkit is available upon request by calling the Heartland Family History's toll free information line at 1-888-881-8852, or by visiting their web site: www.heartlandfamilyhistory.org.

Give a gift of good health to yourself and those you love by creating and sharing a family health history this season.

Adapted from Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services.