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How to Build Your Family Tree

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A complete medical family tree, also known as a pedigree, is now seen as the best way to link geneticists and doctors and lead both to diseases concealed in our genes.

To build your family tree, geneticists recommend digging back three to four generations. Contact all living relatives, explain what a medical pedigree is and let them know you're amassing one in order to discover diseases that may be in your DNA as well as the DNA of your children. Then, over the phone, during a face-to-face visit or at a family reunion, gently ask them about their health. Make your questions specific: What operations did they have? What chronic conditions? At what age was the onset?

Experts say the earlier the onset of an illness, the more significant it is genetically. For example, an uncle who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in his fifties is a much bigger red flag than an uncle who developed it in his eighties. The later the onset, the higher the chance it had to do with environmental factors rather than genetic ones.

To help you with your research, **Joann Boughman**, executive vice president of the American Society of Human Genetics, suggests targeting the one person who acts as the family historian. "There's usually an aunt who knows everything about everybody in the family," Boughman says. Because accounts can differ and memories are imperfect, it's a good idea to double-check information with other relatives.

Most relatives cooperate, says Boughman, but when dealing with those who aren't so forthcoming, emphasize that the information can be relevant to their own health as well as the health of the family's younger generations. Let them know that some diseases can be prevented or stopped, if caught early. To get information about relatives who have died, you can request medical records from the hospitals they used and the physicians who treated them. Your legal right to obtain such records varies from state to state, but in most, you can at least see the documents, say geneticists. That process is often easier if you go through your doctor or a genetic counselor. Sometimes, such medical records contain that person's medical family history. This can be a gold mine, going back another three or four generations.

Because some ethnic groups are at higher risk for certain diseases (African Americans for high blood pressure, for instance, and Native Americans for diabetes), genetic counselors recommend that you note your relatives' ethnic background in your research.

Several software products -- including GeneWeaver, Family Tree Maker, Family Origins, Ultimate Family Tree and GenoPro -- offer help with the process. Several Web sites also offer help gratis. The American Medical Association has guidelines for tree-making on its site (www.ama-assn.org) -- search for "gathering a family history" -- as does the Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute at the Ohio State University (www.jamesline.com) as well as Genetic Health, a software development and medical research firm based in San Mateo, Calif. (www.genetichealth.com), and the Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com-- search for "family tree").

Two helpful books on the topic are "How Healthy Is Your Family Tree? A Complete Guide to Tracing Your Family's Medical and Behavioral Tree" by Carol Krause (Macmillan, 1993) and "The Practical Guide to Genetic Family History" by Robin Bennett (John Wiley & Sons, 1999).

Once you've amassed as much information as you can and have arranged it into a chart, you will probably want to ask your physician or a genetic counselor to help you interpret it all. Both can help you trace patterns and identify connections between relatives that may not be obvious. From there, they can recommend further genetic testing, treatment or changes in lifestyle.

Ob-gyns, who often work with genetics professionals in counseling expectant parents, can be good resources for finding a genetic counselor. Or you can access an online database of genetic counselors through the National Society of Genetic Counselors at (www.nsgc.org/resourcelink.asp).

Finally: Once you complete your medical family tree, don't forget to distribute copies of it to relatives so they can benefit as well.

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