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For Your Health's Sake

Obtaining Your Family's Medical History: Do You Know Yours?

(Huntsville, TX) - As children our mother's knew everything about our health history. She knew what vaccines we received, what ailments we suffered from, even when we lost our first tooth. But how many of us know our own family's medical history? While it may seem a tad uncomfortable to ask such personal questions from our parents, unlocking their health history many times can unlock the door to our own health.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, 96% of Americans rank the need to know one's family health history as important, however only one-third of us actually take the time to assemble this data. This information is vital not only for you, but for your physician or health care provider as it can help them to determine your risks for many health issues including heart disease, cancer, diabetes, etc.

For many, a prime time for gathering such health histories is during a family reunion or family holiday, however, it is important to note for many parents this topic can be a little unsettling and you do not want to spring this on them without advance notice. Nonetheless, sitting down with them and explaining the necessity for you to know their medical history may help relieve some of the tension. But in all fairness give them the opportunity to compile the data. You may want to give them the list of questions they will need to answer well in advance. Attempting to remember the dates of any illnesses they may have suffered from or any treatments they may have received may require some investigation on their part, especially if they are offering medical histories regarding their deceased parents and/or siblings.

It is very important to be as specific as possible, while still respecting your parent's privacy. Reassure your parents that this information is only to be shared with you, your doctor, and your siblings, if they so choose. Once you have the initial talk, it is time to determine what information needs to be obtained.

Below are some of the more commonly asked questions your own physician may need to know.

- Dates of onset of a disease or medical condition. The earlier in life a family member has been diagnosed with a disease, the more likely there may be a genetic pre-disposition.

- Many chronic diseases such as heart disease and type II diabetes may be life-long conditions therefore, knowing symptoms and treatments, if any, will also play a vital role.
- What are/were their health habits? Did/Do they smoke? What type of diet did/do they consume? What activities did/do they participate in?
- If deceased, note the cause and age at the time of death.
- All illnesses and conditions need to be accounted for regardless of the severity. Evidence supports a strong link between heart disease and diabetes, as well as rheumatoid arthritis and heart disease.
- Include such information as high cholesterol, blood pressure, depression, kidney disease, and alcohol/drug dependency issues. Once again note the age of onset.
- And women, don't hesitate to ask about your mother's pregnancy and menopausal histories, including pregnancy complications, miscarriages, stillbirths, and age of onset for menopause.

While a family history will not entirely protect you from the development of certain diseases and/or conditions, they do serve as a vital resource for your physician and you. They allow your physician to determine your risk factors for disease therefore, providing you a means to adopt healthy measures to slow the disease process, avoid the disease process altogether, or allow your physician to closely monitor your health status for possible issues down the road.

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