

Family medical history can inform decisions about your health care

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Family medical history can serve as a roadmap for our health, so it's

important information to share with your primary care physician. An expert at Baylor College of Medicine explains what to know before your next primary care appointment.

"Knowing your [family](#) history can be helpful in identifying if you're at higher risk for certain chronic diseases, mental health conditions or cancers," said Dr. Saundra Nguyen, assistant professor of medicine at Baylor. "For example, someone with a strong family history of colon cancer may be recommended for a colonoscopy earlier than the [general population](#), or we may screen for diabetes in someone with a family history of diabetes. We can also identify early warning signs of disease and work on preventive lifestyle measures."

During a visit with your primary care physician, it's helpful to know your family history of [chronic diseases](#), such as heart disease, hypertension, high cholesterol and diabetes. You should also share information on [family members](#) with cancer, mental health conditions, dementia and genetic disorders. Knowing the age of diagnosis for your family member can also be helpful to your physician.

"If a lot of family members are developing a cancer at age 40, this could be an indication of an inheritable risk factor versus if people develop cancer in their 70s and 80s, when cancer is more common due to age," Nguyen said.

Don't worry about digging too far back into your family tree for [medical history](#). Nguyen says it's best to focus on relatives with whom you share the most DNA. She advises including first- and second-degree relatives such as:

- Parents
- Siblings
- Half-siblings

- Grandparents
- Aunts/uncles

When starting the conversation with family members about medical history, Nguyen recommends being sensitive to how much the person is willing to share. That may vary depending on cultural and generational norms.

"Nobody has to share their personal health information if they don't want to, but I encourage patients to ask different family members and explain how this information can be helpful in being more informed about their health and making health decisions," Nguyen said. "Talking to first-degree relatives like parents and siblings can be a good starting point."

People who are adopted may be able to access [family history](#) through adoption records. Once you have gathered your family medical history, there are [online resources](#) available to help keep track of the information, such as My Family Health Portrait, a tool developed by the National Human Genome Research Institute and the U.S. Surgeon General.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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