

Family health history good clue to your risk of disease

BILL RADFORD THE GAZETTE

If Grandma carries around a box of medicines and you don't know what they're for, ask.

If a cousin died at an early age and you don't know the cause, find out.

It's all part of putting together a family health history -- a step that can help safeguard the health of you and your children.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently launched a campaign to encourage Americans to learn about their families' health histories as a way of promoting personal health and preventing disease.

"The family health history is one of the cheapest and most convenient ways of assessing someone's future risk of disease," says Dr. Matthew Taylor, director of adult clinical genetics at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver.

Many common health conditions are inherited, at least in part.

"Hypertension, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, we know are all related to both lifestyle factors and genetics," says Elena Strait, a genetics counselor at Memorial Hospital.

Knowing your family health history can lead to steps -- screenings, medications, lifestyle changes -- that might reduce your risk of those conditions and diseases that run through your family. A survey conducted last year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that most Americans think knowing family history is important to their health. Yet only a third have tried to gather and organize their families' health histories.

Online tools, including one developed by the Department of Health and Human Services as part of its Family History Initiative, help organize health information. But first that information must be gathered.

Strait tries to take a four-generation family history, or pedigree, for a patient, going back at least to grandparents and including aunts, uncles and first cousins.

Many people have significant gaps in their family histories, she says. They may be reluctant to bring up health issues with loved ones or have lost track of family members. "And there are a lot of secrets in families," Strait says.

Many of her patients are well-versed in their family histories, says Dr. Sabine Shaffer, a physician with Colorado Springs Health Partners.

"It seems to vary with how good the family relations are," she says.

To fill in gaps in health histories, talk with relatives, starting with parents and grandparents if possible. Family Bibles and journals, baby books and death certificates are among other possible sources of information.

Be as specific as possible in assembling information, Shaffer says. If Grandma died of a heart problem, how old was she? And what kind of heart problem did she have?

If a condition that causes worry pops up when gathering information, confer with your doctor or a genetics counselor, Strait says. Many

people have wrong ideas about what is passed on and what is not or about how much of a role genetics plays in a certain condition.

"There are just so many stories out there, 'Oh, it skips a generation.' In reality, there's not very much that skips generations."

Some people may take an overly fatalistic view, thinking they're doomed by a family history of cancer, for example.

"There are very few things that are hopeless," Strait says.

CONTACT THE WRITER: 636-0272 or comics@gazette.com

RESOURCES

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a free computer program that helps users organize important health information into a printout for that person's doctor.

Download "My Family Health Portrait" at <http://hhs.gov/familyhistory>.

The American Society of Human Genetics provides information about collecting and recording a family health history at www.ashg.org/genetics/ashg/educ/007.shtml.

The American Medical Association offers an Adult Family History Form at www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/2380.html.

The National Human Genome Research Institute provides links to other online tools at www.genome.gov/11510372.

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