Knowledge is Power

Know your family history of heart disease

Knowledge is one of your strongest weapons against heart disease. Diseases of the heart and blood vessels (cardiovascular diseases) can run in families. Knowing your family history can provide important information about your health risks. Ohio State’s Ross Heart Hospital and Division of Human Genetics encourage you to talk to your family about their heart health history.

Understanding Your Heart Health Family Tree

1.) The first step is to talk to your immediate family:
   - Parents, siblings and children

2.) Next, reach out to extended family:
   - Grandparents, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews and half siblings

If possible, gather information about cousins, great-uncles and great-aunts.

3.) Collect information

It’s also important to include information on relatives who are deceased. Here is the type of information you’ll want to gather:

What heart conditions or related conditions have family members been diagnosed with?

Some examples include:

- Aneurysm of a major blood vessel such as the aorta or in the brain
- Arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat)
- Bypass surgery of a blocked artery in the heart or legs
- Cardiomyopathy (heart muscle disease or an enlarged heart)
- Congenital (at birth) heart defect
- Coronary artery disease
- Dissection of an artery
- Died young or suddenly
- Fainting episodes (syncope)
- Hardening of the arteries (atherosclerosis)
- Heart attack
- Heart failure
- Heart transplant
- High blood pressure (hypertension)
- High cholesterol
- Seizures
- Stroke or mini-stroke
- Sudden cardiac death
- Sudden infant death syndrome
- Valve disease

What additional information may be helpful?

Remember, your doctor may not be familiar with your family members. So it’s also very helpful to provide information including each person’s sex, age, ancestry (German, Moroccan, Japanese, etc.) and whether they’re living or deceased. For those who are deceased, include how old they were when they died and what their cause of death was.
Turning Information into Action

Even though you cannot change your family history, knowing your family history can help you reduce your risk of developing heart disease. By talking to your doctor about your heart health family history, together you can look for red flags that might indicate the need for a prevention plan, preventive screenings and genetic counseling and potentially, genetic testing.

People with a family history of heart disease and related conditions may have the most to gain from screening tests and lifestyle changes. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist, such as a doctor trained specifically in genetics or a genetic counselor who can determine your genetic risks. Here are some examples of red flags that you can be “on the watch for” in your family history:

Red Flags

- “Heart attack” in a relative under 50 years of age
- Sudden death
- A relative with a specific type of hereditary heart disease. Many types of cardiomyopathy, arrhythmia, aneurysm and cholesterol disorders are hereditary
- Two or more relatives on the same side of the family with the same or related conditions (e.g. heart failure, cardiomyopathy, atrial fibrillation)
- Relatives with symptoms and procedures suspicious for a hereditary arrhythmia: syncope, seizures, relatives with pacemakers and/or defibrillators and sudden death
- Two or more closely-related relatives with a congenital heart defect

Additional red flags may exist and can be explored with your doctor or genetic counselor. By understanding your genetic risk factors, you and your doctor can take preventive measures that may save your life – and the lives of your loved ones.

Ohio State’s Ross Heart Hospital offers clinics that may benefit you and your family, including the Cardiovascular Genetic and Genomic Medicine Clinic and the Inherited Arrhythmia Clinic.

To learn more, call Ohio State’s Cardiovascular Genetics and Genomic Medicine Program at (888) 293-7677.

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