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News Release

## **Family Health: History or Mystery?**

Are you able to list the health concerns that, perhaps, older members of your families face or the health conditions that deceased relatives may have endured? Being aware of each illness with the exclusion of a few types can be eye-opening as relates to a forecast of health concerns that the family will continue to endure. Optimistically, this knowledge holds a vital key to unlocking better health for current and future members of families. Taking a closer look at the family health history may reveal that diseases individual members face are not unique but can be traced through family lineage.

### **Being At War**

In the era where some health issues are in epidemic proportions, it is not hard to believe the statistics that show 40% of the population at an increased genetic risk for at least one disease. It is important to note that risks don't have to materialize into health conditions. An inherited health risk means an individual is predisposed or has a tendency to develop an illness. Nonetheless, diseases have a greater advantage without knowledge and purposeful action to help prevent them. The United States Centers for Disease Control reports that 96.3% of Americans believe knowing their family's health history is important to their health. In contrast, only 29.8% of Americans have tried to gather and organize their family's health history. The former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Richard H. Carmona asserts that the "bottom line is that knowing your family history can save your life." One with a pre-disposition may want to adopt the position of "being at war" to counteract contracting a disease.

### **The Whole Picture**

As one looks into family history, it's important to also pay attention to cultural and similar learned behaviors that play a part in family health issues. While diseases such as sickle cell anemia and cystic fibrosis are purely genetic, many others are related to environment which can be tied into ethnicity, culture and beliefs. Thus, information regarding eating and exercise regimens can be just as important as genetics. Research reflects that they are definitely hand in hand elements.

When reviewing family health history, avoid letting certain conditions stay under the radar. These could be bone (osteoporosis), stomach and eye diseases; Alzheimer's, dementia, and other mental illnesses; or even reproductive health problems among others.

The major health issues that are directly tied to the nation's highest percentage of deaths are heart disease, cancer and strokes. Men also have unique issues with prostate, while women encounter breast health issues. Being proactive presents you with the opportunity to take control of you and your family's health.

**Solving the Mystery:**

Many families have a beautiful rich history of attributes that tie them together; however, predispositions to disease and illnesses cannot be forgotten. There is a solution that can give families the upper-hand. It involves a little family research and dialogue that leads to pulling together a concrete family medical history record. This task can begin at the next dinner around the kitchen table and lead to fact-gathering exercises at family reunions, which prompt family members to do a little homework. Dialogue and research could include looking at older pictures to detect trends in obesity, reviewing death certificates, or obtaining first hand accounts from older or knowledgeable family members. Once the history is collected into one record, it can empower family members to make informed decisions regarding health and to be aware of any warning signs. Those who have any predisposition will want to make sure they alert their physicians. Early health screenings could decrease the risk of unnecessarily suffering from preventable family-related illnesses.

So, plan to spark a change in your family that may add years to your life as well as life to your years. One conversation can be a catalyst to many more that lead to healthier and happier families. To set up a family medical history record online, to download or to print a template, visit <https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/>.

*For more information on this or related topics, contact Synithia Williams, Regional Extension Agent in Family and Child Development for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System at (205) 329-1148 or email at [willisl@aces.edu](mailto:willisl@aces.edu).*

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