

Your family history

Genes are passed from parent to child, so genetic conditions can run in families.

This is not always the case. It is possible to have a genetic condition that no-one else in the family has.

It is also possible for several members of a family to have a particular condition without the condition being genetic. For example, if everybody in a family smokes, that family can have lots of heart disease and cancer.

Having said that, genes and families go together quite strongly.

So if you're thinking about genes, or about diseases running in the family, one important thing you can do is learn about your family's health history.

When looking closely at genetic conditions that may run in your family, your doctor will want to draw a family tree. He or she will want to know about the person you're talking about (whether that's you or someone in your family), as well as all the parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and children, especially those who are blood relatives.

Your doctor will ask a lot of questions in order to examine your family history. Your doctor will want to know:

- All the relationships in your family
- The ages of everyone involved
- Who is alive?
- How old were family members when they died and what did they die of?
- Do they or did they have any medical conditions?
- The names of doctors or hospitals that have cared for affected family members
- What's the ancestry of your family? What country did grandparents and great-grandparents come from?
- Did anybody in the family have any miscarriages, stillborn children or children born with abnormalities?
- Has anybody in the family lived for long periods in a psychiatric institution?
- Has anybody in the family been adopted?
- Has anybody in the family had children with a relative?
- Has anybody in the family been told they have or are a carrier for a genetic condition?
- Has anybody in the family ever been tested for a genetic condition? What was the result?

If you can get answers to some or all of these questions, you and your doctor will be able to make a lot more sense of your family history. If you visit the webpage at <http://www.genetics.edu.au/publications/fhtcons.htm> you can see a sample family history.

Contacts and further information

- Your local genetic service, which you can contact through your nearest community health centre, public hospital or health department.
- Australasian Genetic Alliance at <http://www.australasiangeneticalliance.org.au>
- The Centre for Genetics Education at <http://www.genetics.edu.au>
- For other related fact sheets, you can contact the Gene Technology Information Service on **free call Australia-wide 1800 631 276** or email gtis-australia@unimelb.edu.au or visit Biotechnology Australia's website at <http://www.biotechnology.gov.au>