

The Heart of the Family



How well do you know your family history? When it comes to your heart health, your family may be more important than you think. Both your risk factors for heart disease, such as obesity or high blood pressure, and your risk for cardiovascular disease itself are greatly affected by genetics. Though a family history of heart disease or heart attacks is a potent risk factor for developing cardiovascular disease yourself, it is your immediate family who will be most important when considering risk assessment. Studies have shown that having a first-degree relative – parents and siblings – who has had a heart attack under the age of 55 increases your risk by 33 percent, while having two or more such relatives increases your risk by 50 percent. So how do you know if you are genetically predisposed to heart disease? Follow these tips to compile a family heart history:

- **Do your research.** If you don't know your family's full medical history, begin by talking with your immediate family. Find out if your parents, grandparents, or siblings have had heart disease, and if so, how old they were when the disease developed.
- **Know your risk factors.** The more close family members you have who have suffered a heart attack or heart disease – and the younger they were when they had heart problems – will increase your personal risk. Find out if your family members who have had heart disease had risk factors other than genetics, such as being a smoker. If they did not, then your genetic risk is even greater. Also find out if you have a family history of risk factors that can contribute to heart disease, such as obesity, diabetes, cholesterol abnormalities, and high blood pressure.

- **Don't worry about ancient history.** It isn't necessary to research your great-grandparents' health histories because the environment and medical treatments were very different than they are now.

So, what happens if you do have a family history of heart disease? Don't panic! Though you are more likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease if you are genetically predisposed, lifestyle behaviors are equally important in helping to stave off or manage heart disease. Here are some important steps to follow if your family has a history of heart problems.

- **You can't pick your family history:** You can't change your genetics, but if you have a family history of heart disease, changing your environment is imperative.
- **Lower your risk:** Change any behaviors that may contribute to heart disease. Eating healthily, getting regular exercise, and quitting smoking can all have a huge impact on your heart health and can help you to ward off heart disease.
- **Get screened:** Keeping your blood pressure under control and getting your cholesterol checked are incredibly important if you have a family history of heart disease, especially if your family members suffered from a heart attack at a young age. If a family member younger than 55 has a heart attack, it is imperative that all first-degree relatives are screened.
- **Tell your physician:** Share your family's heart-health history with your healthcare provider as soon as possible. He or she can work with you to develop a plan that is right for you and your family.