

Heart TALK

Heart-healthy and Stroke-free Living with Dr. Amy L. Doneen, DNP, ARNP

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*Thoughts
from
Dr. Amy*



Did you know that your family medical history can provide insights into everything from your life expectancy to your risk for heart attacks, strokes, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, dementia and even dental problems? Finding out which disorders run in your family — and sharing this information with your medical provider — could even save your life. For example, your provider might recommend lifestyle changes to reduce your risk for these conditions, order screening or diagnostic tests that might not otherwise be considered, or advise more frequent checkups to look for early signs of these diseases.

What's more, working together with your relatives to develop a shared family medical history could help them stay healthy too. The holidays are an ideal time to kick off this project, using a family Zoom call or other virtual gathering. New online resources make compiling your family's health data easier than ever before. Here's how to compile a family medical history and gain a priceless gift: knowledge that will help you and the people you care most about live well.

What's the fastest way to start compiling your family medical history?

A new online tool from the U.S. Surgeon General can help you build a basic family medical history in just 15 to 20 minutes. [Available at My Family Health Portrait](#), this tool asks you to fill out simple forms, then generates a "pedigree" family tree that you can download and share with family members and your medical provider. Your relatives can then use your data as a starting point to build their own family medical trees. The health data is compiled in a format that is also easy for medical providers to enter into electronic medical records. You

can update it over time. The information you provide is completely private, as the software doesn't create any government record of your health data. For an extensive list of other family medical history resources and a downloadable toolkit, visit [the website of Heartland Genetics Services Network](#).

What kind of information should you gather?

Ideally, your family medical history should include three or more generations. Gather data about your grand-

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parents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, first cousins, nieces, nephews, children and grandchildren. Also include your own health history. For each family member, record as much as the following data as possible:

- Date of birth
- Sex
- Ethnicity
- Medical conditions, including the age at which they occurred
- Dental disorders, such as gum disease, oral infections and tooth loss
- Pregnancy complications, such as gestational diabetes, pre-eclampsia (high blood pressure and protein in the urine), miscarriages and stillbirths
- Mental health conditions
- “Red flags” for heart attack, stroke and diabetes, such as the risk factors [listed on the BaleDoneen website](#).
- Lifestyle, including smoking, substance abuse and diet and exercise habits
- For deceased relatives, list the age at death and the cause

What’s the best way to broach these topics with your family members?

Since some family members may be bashful about disclosing their health details, you might start by sending all of the family members a letter or email explaining your goal: to help everyone in the family live their best life, get optimal medical care and reduce their risk for inherited diseases. Let them know that you will share the information you collect with them so they can alert their medical provider to any disorders that run in the family.

There are several approaches you can use to collect medical information. For example, you could prepare a questionnaire for them to fill out, or provide a checklist of medical, dental and psychological conditions. Or you could offer to have private conversations with family members who may have sensitivities about their health issues. If you decide to have such conversations, it’s helpful to [prepare a list of questions in advance](#)



and listen respectfully to what the person tells you, without making judgments on his or her lifestyle or medical choices.

Another option is to have a group Zoom call in which you ask the family members to help you develop family history questions for everyone to answer. Doing so can help get everyone invested in the project and your relatives may think of some questions or topics that haven’t occurred to you. Some family members may prefer to share their health information by email or snail mail instead of the phone, so it’s wise to provide multiple ways to respond.

What are some actionable insights you might gain from compiling a family medical history?

Researchers have identified a number of intriguing ways that your relatives’ health — and the genes you inherit from your parents — can influence your own wellness. Studies also have revealed a number of insights about how to optimize your wellness, regardless of what’s written in your DNA. Here are some of the latest findings:

• **Your parents hold clues to how long you will live.** Women have a greater likelihood of living past age 90 without any chronic diseases — such as heart disease, cancer or diabetes — if their mothers did, a recent study reported. An [even newer study](#) found that children of

long-lived parents have a significantly lower risk for developing arterial disease, heart failure, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. The researchers also found that for each parent who lived past age 70, study participants had a 20 percent lower risk for dying from heart disease, even when a wide range of factors were taken into account.

• **Genes can predict your risk for heart disease — and the best ways to reduce it.** About 50 percent of Americans carry genes that greatly increase their risk for heart attacks and strokes, such as 9P21, often called “the heart attack gene.” However, as [we recently reported](#), a very large study found that people with 9P21 and other genes that put them at high risk for developing heart disease cut their risk by about 50 percent if they are physically fit. The BaleDoneen Method uses genetic testing to offer insights into our patients’ risk for heart attacks and strokes — as well as the best diet to reduce that risk. [Click here](#) to learn more about a diet based on your DNA.

• **A simple blood test can reveal if you are at genetic risk for atrial fibrillation.** Up to 6.1 million Americans have atrial fibrillation (AF), an irregular heartbeat that can lead to blood clots, heart failure and increased risk for death from cardiovascular causes. Having AF quintuples risk for stroke and doubles it

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Although carrot pie may sound like a surprising choice for a holiday dessert, this delectable recipe is sure to win compliments from people who love pumpkin and pecan pies. Carrots give this easy dessert a beautiful color, a naturally sweet flavor and an abundance of heart-healthy nutrients, including beta carotene, fiber, potassium, vitamins A, B6 and K1, and a variety of disease-fighting antioxidants. Not only are carrots diet-friendly with just 40 calories each, but they've been linked to better eye health, lower cholesterol and lower risk for certain cancers. For a flavor variation, replace the ginger and nutmeg in the recipe with a teaspoon of pumpkin spice and decrease the amount of cinnamon to ½ teaspoon. For a vegan pie, use a vegan crust and condensed coconut milk. To make the recipe gluten-free, use a gluten-free crust.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 cups peeled, sliced fresh carrots
- 1 can condensed milk (14 ounces)
- 2 eggs
- ¼ teaspoon ginger
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 10-inch unbaked pie crust
- 1 cup chopped or whole pecans

PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 375°. Place carrots in a large saucepan or pot. Add water to barely cover carrots, then bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat to low and simmer for 10-12 minutes or until tender. Drain and cool. Put carrots, condensed milk, eggs, ginger and cinnamon in a blender or food processor. Cover and process until pureed. Pour mixture into pie crust and top with chopped or whole pecans. Bake for 45-50 minutes or until a knife inserted into the center comes out clean and edges are browned. Cool on a wire rack, then enjoy! Makes 8 servings. Adapted from thegiftedgabby.com and tasteofhome.com.

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for heart attack or dementia. Although early detection and treatment can help save lives, this dangerous disorder often goes undiagnosed until the patient has suffered serious complications, such as a stroke. Discuss your risk for AF with your medical provider and ask about a simple blood test to check for a genetic variant called 4q25 that greatly increases the likelihood of developing AF. [Click here](#) to learn more about this test and who should consider it.

• **Even if heart attacks, strokes and/or dementia run in your family, there is a proven way to avoid these devastating conditions.** Check out the BaleDoneen Method's new [AHA \(Arterial Health Assurance\) for Life program](#). Drawing on the latest peer-reviewed science and the pioneering new medical specialty of "arteriology," the program is designed to protect, enhance and even save your life with a unique, precision-medicine approach to prevention. This has been shown

in two recent peer-reviewed studies to rapidly shrink and stabilize arterial plaque, helping patients avoid heart attacks and strokes, even if they have already suffered one or more of these events. The program includes a free, personalized risk assessment for arterial disease and a wealth of online tools and resources to support you step-by-step through our life-changing disease reversal and prevention method, practiced by thousands of healthcare providers around the world.