

My grandparents' living room is decorated in wallpaper with a repeating pattern. A large, framed picture of me hangs on one of the walls, covering a portion of the wallpaper. Although I can't see the wall behind the picture, I can easily tell what the hidden portion of wallpaper looks like by studying the pattern around it.

The picture is me. The wall behind it is my genetic future. The part of the wall I can see is everything I know or can find out about my genetic past: the physical traits and dispositions that I, my mother or father, siblings and cousins may have inherited from my grandparents.

The hidden pattern of my natural makeup may determine not only what I will look like in twenty years but how long I will live and the personal health issues I may expect to face.

Jesus tells us always to be watchful and ready for God to make demands of us, "for you do not know the day nor the hour." In the meantime he urges us always to live as good Stewards: to use our common sense and see the purpose and meaning of things as they are right now.



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Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?

1 Corinthians 6:19

Stewardship of Health

FAMILY HISTORY

There are signs in our lives that can prepare us for what we can't yet see or know. Part of serving God well today is being ready to serve Him well tomorrow and as long as I live.

Health professionals have long known that **both common and rare chronic illnesses can run in families**. My family's history of illness can help my doctor predict my risk of developing health problems and take action to keep me and my family healthy.

In Michigan, it's **urgent** that families collect, record and share with each other their history of **illnesses that are among the leading causes of death in this state**:

- Heart disease, cancer, stroke, lung disease, diabetes, Alzheimer's, kidney disease and serious infections like pneumonia, going back **at least three generations**.

Families also need to know about members in each generation who have had **other conditions known to run in families**:

- High blood pressure, high cholesterol, arthritis, asthma, allergies, mental illness or retardation, epilepsy or seizures, hemophilia or other blood disorder, osteoporosis, muscular disorders, vision loss, hearing loss, sudden unexplained deaths or early childhood deaths, birth defects, developmental retardation or learning disabilities, stillbirths, two or more miscarriages, or known genetic disorders such as cystic fibrosis, Down syndrome and Huntington's disease.

The first step is to talk about it. Holidays and reunions can be a good opportunity to gather information, fill gaps in information and ask the "family historian" about the illnesses and causes of death of deceased family members.

I also can consult **existing documents** such as family trees, baby books, old letters, obituaries or records from places of worship; and public records such as birth certificates, marriage licenses and death certificates, which can be obtained from county record offices. Adoption agencies can provide biological family medical information to adopted family members.

The second step is to write it down. The U.S. Surgeon General's family history form, "**My Family Health Portrait**," helps users organize family history information and then save and share with doctors and other family members. Download at <https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/>.

The "Family Health Portrait" form and other models focus on "**red flags**" in a family health history that may predict increased risk, such as:

- Diseases, critical events or deaths that occur at an **earlier age** than expected
- The **same disease in more than one** relative
- Disease occurring in a **gender not normally affected**, such as breast cancer in a male
- Certain **combinations of diseases** within a family, such as breast and ovarian cancer.

A **complete** Family Health History will include **medical, sex, age, ethnicity and lifestyle** information about **grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts, siblings, cousins, children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren**.

The third step is to pass it on. Julie Zenger-Hain, Ph.D., FACMG Board Certified Cytogeneticist and Medical Geneticist at Oakwood Healthcare System says, "Many of us may know our family history, but we need to take it to the next step and **share that information with our physicians**. In doing so we can come up with an appropriate plan to insure longevity with our family."

"You too,
BE READY; FOR
THE SON OF MAN IS COMING
AT AN HOUR
THAT YOU DO NOT EXPECT."

Luke 12:40