

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Your Family History: Proactively Protecting Your Health

Like it or not, your closest family members may play a large role in your current and future health and well-being. Aside from sharing genes, family members often grow up in similar environments and have similar lifestyle habits. As a result, if one or more of your closest blood relatives has suffered a chronic disease or health condition, you may have a higher risk of developing that illness than someone without this family connection.

Fortunately, knowledge is power when it comes to reducing the negative impact that family genetics can have on your own health. With the right information, there's a lot you can do to prevent or minimize your risk of developing many serious illnesses:

Map out your family health history. The first step is to research and create a family health history. A family health history is a written or illustrated document listing the major diseases and health conditions within the last three generations of your immediate biological relatives. Your history should include the age of diagnosis for any chronic illnesses, as well as the age and cause of death for any deceased relatives.

In most cases, the best way to put together your family health history is by speaking directly with your family members. Where available, death certificates and family medical records may also be helpful. Once created, be sure to update this history every couple years and share the information with others who may benefit.

Talk to your doctor. When your family health history is as complete as possible, share it with your family doctor. This information can help your doctor predict which illnesses and conditions you may have the greatest risk of developing. In turn, this can help him or her to recommend tests, screenings and lifestyle changes to minimize these risks and keep you and your family healthy.

In particular, be sure to point out any of the following as they may indicate a higher risk for some conditions:

- Diseases diagnosed significantly earlier than when they appear in most people
- The same disease or condition diagnosed in more than one close relative
- A disease that usually affects one gender, but that has surfaced in the other (e.g., a male diagnosed with breast cancer)
- More than one condition diagnosed together (e.g., heart disease and diabetes)

Get tested*. With early detection, many serious hereditary diseases can be controlled or even prevented. Based on your family history and other risk factors, your doctor may recommend routine testing for a variety of conditions. Commonly suggested screenings include:

- **Breast cancer.** Women are recommended to have a clinical breast exam every two years after age 40 and a mammogram every two years after age 50.

© 2026 Morneau Shepell Ltd.

- **Colon cancer.** Everyone 50 years and older should be screened with a fecal occult blood test (FOBT) every two years. With a family history of colon cancer, a colonoscopy is also recommended at age 50, or 10 years earlier than the diagnosis of a parent or sibling.

- **Heart disease and stroke.** Cholesterol testing is recommended every five years for adults over the age of 20. However, those with family history of heart disease or stroke, obesity or other risk factors may be recommended to test more frequently.

- **Type 2 diabetes**. The American **Diabetes** Association (ADA) recommends that adults age 45 and older **get** screened for type 2 **diabetes** every three years by their health care provider. More frequent testing may be suggested if you have a family history of diabetes or other risk factors.

***IMPORTANT:** Please note that these recommendations are for general information only and should not be taken as medical advice. Consult your doctor to determine the recommended type and frequency of screenings for your situation.

Take care of yourself. Regardless of your family history, everyone can reduce their risk of developing many chronic diseases by:

- Eating a healthy, balanced diet high in whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Limit salt, cholesterol, saturated and trans fats wherever possible

- Exercising daily

- Aiming for a healthy weight

- Finding positive ways to handle or reduce stress

- Quitting smoking and avoiding or limiting consumption of alcohol

When it comes to health, none of us can control our family history. But with the right knowledge, and a focus on disease prevention and early detection, you can maximize your chances for a long, healthy and active life.