

Take Time This Christmas to Learn Family History

Because of the pandemic, holiday family gatherings may look different this year. The glow of a Zoom call is often replacing the glow of a fire-lit family room. However, no matter how we connect with family this holiday season, taking advantage of time spent together could be valuable in many ways, including the chance to learn about shared health history.

A family health history helps physicians and other health care professionals provide better care for their patients. Dr. Omar Khokhar is an OSF HealthCare gastroenterologist in Bloomington. He says taking advantage of the time spent talking with family members can help identify the risk for certain health problems, especially when it comes to colon cancer.

“There is definitely a hereditary component to colon cancer,” he says. “So if your mom, your dad, aunt, uncle, grandma, grandpa have had colon cancer, it’s important to know that, because that contributes to your risk profile as an individual.”

But how far do we climb into the family tree? In general, the history should include incidents of chronic diseases – such as [heart disease](#), [stroke](#), [cancer](#), [mental health issues](#) and [alcoholism](#) or other [substance abuse](#) – for first-, second- and third-degree relatives. Dr. Khokhar says in his practice, he is also looking for certain specifics when it comes to age.

“It’s important to know some specifics. The specifics would be, if someone had colon cancer in your family, what age were they diagnosed? If it’s a certain age – if they got it at age 88, it’s not really a risk factor for you. But if they had it at age 52, that’s really important because that means it was an early-onset cancer and that contributes significantly to your risk profile.”

This holiday season, Dr. Khokhar suggests bringing up the topic of family history. He admits it might be a bit uncomfortable to discuss, but it shouldn’t be taboo.

“Maybe talk about how you are looking to be more proactive about your health in the following year,” Dr. Khokhar suggests. “Is there anything about your health that I would want to know in terms of your screenings? Maybe start off the conversation with, ‘Hey, have you had any routine screenings done recently? Have you had a mammogram, have you had a pap smear, have you had a colonoscopy, is there anything I need to know?’”

A number of online tools and questionnaires from trusted sources can help assist you in collecting your family health history.

“[My Family Health Portrait](#)” is a tool from the Surgeon General and hosted on the website of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It allows you to enter your family health history, learn about your risk for conditions that can run in families and print out your history to share with your doctor.

The [American Medical Association](#) (AMA) has questionnaires and other resources to help you in collecting, creating and understanding the importance of knowing your family health history.