

Common Health Conditions and Heart Diseases

After you finish your Family Health Tree, you may see some health conditions that you don't recognize. Here is a list of common health conditions and heart diseases that are often passed down to family members. After reading about each of these, ask your parents to help you decide which healthy habits you can use to help reduce your risk for getting these conditions too.

Diabetes: There are two main types of diabetes, type 1 and type 2. People can be born with the risk for Type 1 diabetes. In type 1 diabetes, the pancreas does not produce enough insulin. Type 2 diabetes (which is the most common type) usually develops later in a person's life. In type 2 diabetes, the body has problems with a chemical called "insulin," which is very important to help your body have energy to work. Being overweight or obese and not being physically active are two things that can lead a person to develop type 2 diabetes. If it is not treated for a long time, diabetes can cause problems for the body and increase chances of getting heart disease.

Stroke: Stroke is also known as cerebrovascular disease, which means a disease of the blood vessels that supply the blood to the brain. A stroke happens when a blood vessel that is carrying oxygen and other nutrients to the brain gets blocked or bursts open. When that happens, the part of the brain where that vessel was going no longer gets the blood (and oxygen) that it needs, so it starts to die. Without being treated by a doctor, a stroke can cause permanent damage to your brain and body or even death. People are most likely to have a stroke after age 55, when they don't eat a heart healthy diet, aren't physically active, and may be overweight or obese. Having other risk factors for heart disease, like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes, can also increase the chance of getting a stroke.

High Blood Pressure: Blood pressure is literally the pressure the blood in the body puts on the walls of the blood vessels when your heart beats. Blood vessels are tubes in the body that take blood from place to place around the body. When the heart beats and pushes out blood, the pressure on the blood vessels increases. Many things can affect our blood pressure like physical activity, rest, being hot or cold, our emotions, what we eat, and much more. High blood pressure is the number one cause of a stroke. People whose blood pressure is above normal are said to have high blood pressure, or hypertension. Hypertension can increase a person's chances of getting heart disease because the heart and blood vessels are working much harder than normal. High blood pressure often runs in families, but by maintaining a healthy weight, making healthy food choices, and staying physically active (at least 60 minutes per day) you can help reduce your risk for developing high blood pressure.

Heart Disease/Heart Attack: Heart disease, also called cardiovascular disease, means that there are problems with a person's heart and blood vessels. Heart disease is caused by several things, known as risk factors. Some risk factors can't be prevented (like your genetics and your Family Health Tree), but other risk factors we can control, like not smoking, making healthy food choices, keeping a healthy weight, and staying physically active each day. All of these things can help reduce your risk for high blood pressure and heart disease. A heart attack happens when the blood flow to part of the heart is blocked, causing the heart muscle to die because it is no longer getting oxygen. A heart attack can be a result of heart disease.

High Cholesterol: Cholesterol is a soft, fatty, waxy substance found in the body's blood and cells. Cholesterol is a very important part of a healthy body because it is used for producing cell membranes (which is a protective barrier) and some hormones (which are chemicals that do things like help you grow). It also helps the body with many other functions. But,, too much cholesterol in the blood can increase your chances of heart disease. Hypercholesterolemia is the word doctors use to describe high levels of cholesterol in the blood. Some cholesterol is already found in our body (the amount can be affected by your family health history) and some comes from the food we eat (egg yolks, shellfish, organ meats such as liver). Your blood cholesterol can also be increased by eating foods that contain saturated fat and trans fat. By eating foods that do not have a lot of cholesterol, saturated fat, and trans fat (like fruits, vegetables, and fiber-rich whole grains), we can reduce the amount of cholesterol in our bodies, which decreases our chances of heart disease.