

Climbing the Family Tree Could Save Your Life

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

Posted on : February 13, 2012 at 7:10 am

OLYMPIA, Wash. - There's more to your family tree than just interesting facts about your ancestors. Experts say it also contains valuable medical information which one day could save your life.

Almost every chronic disease or condition has some sort of hereditary or genetic component, says Amy Sturm, a clinical assistant professor and genetic counselor at Ohio State University Medical Center and Ohio State's Comprehensive Cancer Center. She says learning about your relatives' health conditions may alert you to possible inherited diseases or risk factors.

You need to go out and take a little bit of this on yourself. Talk to your family, ask questions, write this all down. Share it with your children, share it with the next generation - because it can be such powerful information. - Amy Sturm

Sturm suggests also sharing your family health history with a doctor or genetic counselor. Many diseases have risk factors, and you can take steps to reduce that risk or lessen diseases' severity if you know about them early enough.

Medical conditions which run in families include heart disease, diabetes, asthma and some types of cancer.

When combing through the family medical history, Sturm says, look for a high number of relatives with the same or a related disease. The closer the relative, she says, the higher risk you may face for contracting the same disease or condition. One of the biggest red flags, she says, is an early age of onset.

"A person who had a heart attack under the age of 50; a person who was diagnosed with any type of cancer under the age of 50 - that is a major clue to us that there could be some sort of genetic predisposition that made that person get that disease at a very early age."

Genetic testing can begin with any family member who has been diagnosed with a specific ailment, Sturm says. A blood test will determine if there is a genetic change or mutation which may have predisposed them to that disease. Other family members can then be tested for the same genetic change.

More information about risks for cancer and heart disease based on personal and family health history is online at familyhealthlink.osumc.edu.