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The Lesbian and Gay Family Building Project  
Healthy Families Initiative  
124 Front St  
Binghamton , NY 13905  
(607) 724-4308

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# Healthy Futures

A guide to healthy living through  
family health history awareness



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## Family Health History: An Introduction

### Family History

The events and experiences of your everyday life are part of history. They are part of your personal history and your family history. A family history is a portrait of the lives of members of an extended family. It includes the stories and traditions your family has experienced over the years as well as health and lifestyle choices.

### Family Health History and Future Health in LGBT Families

LGBT families are created in many unique ways. Our identified families share history, traditions and values and sometimes our genetic structure. Health care professionals have known for a long time that common diseases such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes can run in families. New studies show that even families who are not biologically related often share health concerns that stem from behavior and lifestyle choices. Your personal health is influenced by your family health history and by your family history in general. Even families who do not share complete biological ties share important family health history information. Researching your family's medical history as well as being aware of lifestyle choices may help you prevent some medical conditions and help you make the right healthcare choices.



*In order to make choices that translate into a healthy life, you need to understand your current health condition, your risk for developing certain diseases, and what you need to do in order to stay healthy. Awareness of your family health history can help your understanding.*

## Understanding Genetics and Disease

Cells are the building blocks that make up our bodies. Chromosomes are in the nucleus of cells. Chromosomes are made up of small parts called genes. Genes direct the structure and function of your cells. Genes are inherited from your biological parents. You get one set from your mother and one set from your father. Genes carry the instructions for everything in your body— from how each cell is made to how you look. They also influence what diseases you might be at risk for or pass down to your own children.

Most diseases are caused by a combination of genes and the environment. This means that people with similar gene mutations may or may not develop a disease. Environment includes where and how you live, the food you eat, your mood and the germs around you. Mutations in genes can raise or lower the chance that you will have a disease.

Until we are better able to understand the interaction between genes and environment, family health history awareness is the best way to determine your risk for a particular disease.

### Lydia's Story

*When I interviewed my mother, I found out that cancer runs in my family. But they are all different kinds of cancer, so I don't know if this is a pattern or not.*



*My aunt -my mother's sister—had cancer of the esophagus and died. My dad's grandmother had cancer of the uterus and died. My Dad had colon cancer and lived.*

*So I need to ask my doctor, "Are these types of cancer related genetically? What is my risk? Is there a test I can take?"*

### *Gathering and recording your family health history*

#### **Make a Family List**

- Write down the names and ages of everyone in your family
- Remember to include your partner (if you have one) and his/her children and his/her family members that are part of your life
- Include any health conditions or diseases that you know of and any causes of death
- Document known pregnancies, miscarriages and births and any diagnosed conditions at birth

#### **Talk to Your Family**

Talking with your relatives is a great way to learn about your family's health history.

#### Sample Questions:

- Where were you born? Tell me about your neighborhood.
- Did you experience any health conditions (ex; allergies) or illnesses as a child?
- Did you have children? How many? How old are they now?
- What do you remember about your grandparents? What did they die from and how old were they?
- Did anyone in your family take medications on a regular basis?
- What is/was a typical family dinner at your house?
- Are there any health conditions that “run in your family”?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your family?

One way to organize your family's health information is to create a summary of each member's family health history. Both in emergency or non-emergency situations, a summary of health information can provide doctors with the knowledge to diagnose and treat your family member.

**For each family member, write down the following information:**

Name and Relationship to you  
(self, parent, child, etc.)

- Race , ethnicity and/or geographic origin of parents
- Date of Birth
- Adoption Date
- Current Address
- Occupation
- Nutrition and Diet
- Exercise
- Habits
- Immunizations
- Childbirth
- Major Diseases or Health Conditions
- History of Surgeries
- Current and Past Medications
- Allergies
- Age of Death and Cause of Death

*If the actual disease is not known, symptoms and stories can be very helpful. For example, if your grandfather was confined to a wheelchair but you are not sure why, this is still important information to include.*

### Know Your Risks

Researching and documenting your family health history gives you an idea of what runs in your family. Learning about your family history and taking a comprehensive look at your lifestyle and your family's attitude toward wellness can help you stay healthy. Also, knowing some of the common risk factors for disease can help you talk to your doctor about what steps you can take to reduce your risks. Once you know what diseases and conditions you are at risk for, you can decide what to do about it.

#### *Matt's Story...*

*At Thanksgiving I heard several of my relatives say they are on medication for high blood pressure. My older brother said his doctor wants to recheck his every few months because it is slightly elevated. He is only 45 years old. My partner and I both smoke, but we live an otherwise healthy and active lifestyle. Should I be worried?*



A 2004 Gay and Lesbian Medical Association Membership Survey found that 50 % of respondents witnessed substandard care based on patient's perceived sexual orientation. 64% of respondents believe that revealing sexual orientation places patients at risk for substandard care. This and other factors unique to the lifestyle of LGBT patients places them at a greater risk for certain health issues.\*

*\* It is important to note that many of the increased health risks of LGBT patients are a direct result of the societal marginalization and stigmatization of sexual minorities and are NOT due to their identification as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.*

Once you are aware of the conditions that tend to run in your family, you can make choices to reduce those risks as much as possible. Changes in diet, activity level and lifestyle may reduce your risk of developing a certain disease or condition. While it is true that not all diseases can be eliminated by a healthful diet or exercise, your risk for some common conditions can be greatly reduced.

- **Stop Smoking-** A 2005 study by the American Cancer Society found that while 16% of Americans smoke, 30% of LGBT people are smokers. Smoking increases your risk for heart disease and cancer.
- **Exercise More-** Active people are generally healthier people, and aerobic exercise can help keep your heart healthy.
- **Eat Healthier-** A diet low in fat and cholesterol will help reduce your risk of heart disease, diabetes and other conditions that are common in families today.
- **Visit Your Doctor-** Having regular check-ups with a physician that knows you and is aware of your family health history can be an important part of reducing your risk for disease.

*It is important to remember that the children in LGBT-led families are affected and influenced by the lifestyle of their parents and other people around them. Even though your children may not have biological connections to you, their health for years to come will be shaped by the choices you make for yourself and your family.*

