

Genetics and Your Practice

Mary Pritzlaff, M.S., C.G.C.

Genetic Counselor

Moncrief Cancer Resources/UT Southwestern Medical Center

Home(work) for the Holidays

As I am writing this, Turkey Day is looming, and I'm starting to think about all of the fun family gatherings that will take place in the next several weeks. As a genetic counselor, I can't help but think what a great opportunity the holidays are for sharing family history information. The surgeon general must agree, since he designated Thanksgiving as National Family History Day.

Family history is a routine part of most medical evaluations, and is especially important in the oncology setting. Although hereditary cancer syndromes occur in a relatively small percentage of individuals with cancer, the associated risks are significant, and can significantly alter medical management. For this reason, it is important that we have accurate and complete family history information for accurate genetic risk assessment. The holidays offer a special opportunity for families to gather together, and can be a great time to share this information.

In general, family history information should include three generations of the family; ages of family members (or age at death); type of cancer diagnosis, age of diagnosis, significant environmental exposures, bilateral or multiple primary cancers, any other significant medical problems, ethnicity, and previously identified genetic mutations. Some families will share this information in an informal way. Others will use tools such as the Surgeon General's Family Health Portrait tool (<https://familyhistory.hhs.gov>) to collect and save this information. Regardless of how the information is collected or saved, it is important for all families to be aware of their history.

Of course, some of this information can be sensitive, and these topics can be difficult to discuss in some families – especially when there is a genetic diagnosis or a long history of disease. As genetic counselors, we provide patients some basic strategies for discussing their family history and for disclosing genetic test results. In general, we remind families to be sensitive to each other's needs. It is important to choose the right time and place to discuss family history information. It is also important for an individual to consider their own motivations, expectations, thoughts and feelings when sharing a genetic test result or a new diagnosis. We also discuss strategies for communicating with children, and the importance of considering the developmental stage of a child when communicating health information. If a family member has information that they hope the rest of the family will act upon, it is important for them to remember that their job is to disclose the information, and they cannot control what their relatives choose to do with the information. We encourage our patients to enlist the help of

their genetic counselor or other healthcare professionals to help convey genetic information when needed, and we routinely provide letters for patients to share with family members that explain their test results and the importance of genetic assessment for other relatives.

As we head in to the holiday season, I hope that you will encourage your patients to do their homework and talk to their families about their family history. I also hope that you will do the same. As always, if you have cancer genetics questions or referrals, please contact us at 817-838-4874. Wishing you and your family Happy Holidays!