

Thinking About Your Family Health History



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If you're pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant, you may wonder what your baby will look like. Will she have black hair like you or brown eyes like your partner? Hair and eye color, also called **traits**, run in families. Traits are passed from grandparents to parents to children.

Just like hair and eye color, parents can pass certain health conditions to their children. As you get ready to have your baby, find out about health conditions in your family. This is called taking your **family health history**. Use the form at the back of this booklet to record any health conditions that you, your partner and your family members have.

Read this booklet to find out:

- How your family health history can affect you and your baby
- How to take your family health history
- What to do with your family health history

This booklet contains words you may hear a lot when talking about pregnancy and your family health history. You'll see them in **pink**. You can find their definitions and see how to pronounce them in the *Words to know* section on pages 18 to 21.

Here's what's inside:

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| How do parents pass traits to their children?..... | page 2 |
| What is your family health history?..... | page 4 |
| How do you take your family health history? | page 6 |
| What do you do with your family health history? | page 10 |
| What can you do to help prevent health problems for your baby? | page 13 |
| Family health history resources | page 16 |
| Key points to remember..... | page 17 |
| Words to know | page 18 |
| Family health history form | inside back cover |



watch & learn

To watch a video about family health history, visit:
marchofdimes.com/familyhealthhistory

How do parents pass traits to their children?

Parents pass traits, like curly hair and green eyes, to their children through **genes**. Genes are part of the cells in your body. Genes store instructions for the way your body grows, looks and works. You carry genes that may make you short or tall, right- or left-handed or have curly or straight hair. You get or **inherit** these genes from your parents.

Sometimes the instructions in genes change. This is called a **gene change** or a **mutation**. Sometimes a gene change can cause a gene to not work correctly. Sometimes it can cause **birth defects** or other health conditions. Parents can pass these gene changes to their children. A birth defect is a health condition that is present in a baby at birth.

A great way to find out about health conditions and birth defects that you may pass to your children is to do a family health history and share it with your **health care provider**.

Gene changes can lead to certain health conditions and birth defects, like:

Health conditions

- Certain cancers, like breast and ovarian cancer
- **Diabetes**
- **High blood pressure**

Birth defects

- **Cystic fibrosis (CF)**
- Heart defects
- **Sickle cell disease**



What is your family health history?

Your family health history is a record of health conditions and treatments that you, your partner and everyone in your families have had. It can help you find medical problems that run in your family that may affect your pregnancy and your baby.

Knowing about health conditions before or early in pregnancy can help you and your health care provider decide on treatments and care for your baby.



Beth's story

I was really excited about my first prenatal visit. My provider asked me a lot of questions about my health and the health of my family. I told her my mom had a problem with her heart when she was born, but she's fine now. I also had a cousin with learning problems and a niece who was born with a birth defect called **cleft lip**. The doctors operated on her lip, and now you can barely see a scar.

Even though everyone's fine, my provider wants me to talk to a **genetic counselor**. She said this is a person who is specially trained to know about and help me learn about medical problems that run in families. The genetic counselor can help me find out if my baby could have some of the same kinds of health problems. I want to know all I can about my baby's health.

How do you take your family health history?

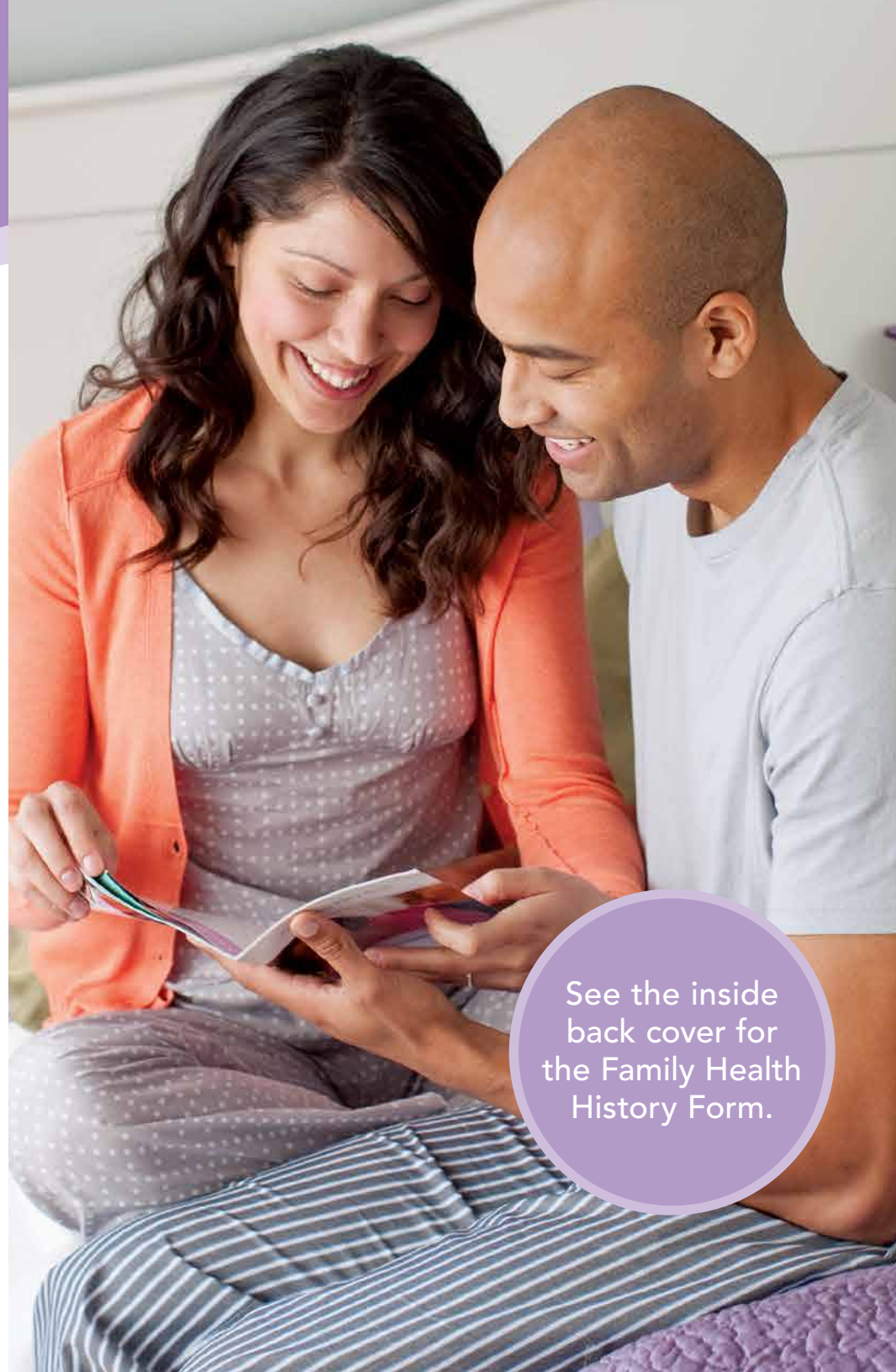
Use the family health history form at the back of this booklet to write down your history. You also can find the form at marchofdimes.com/familyhealthhistory.

This form does not replace the health history form that you fill out at your health care provider's office. But you can use it to get started on your family health history and then share it with your provider.

Send a copy of the form to all your family members. Ask them to fill it out and send it back to you. Or call and ask them the questions. Tell them why you need to find out about the health history of all family members. Try to get information back from everyone in your family and your partner's family.

How do you fill out the form?

1. Read the directions at the top of the form. Don't skip them. They contain important information.
2. Take your time. You may not know all the answers. Check with your partner and family members to help you answer all the questions.
3. When thinking about health conditions in your family, focus just on family members who are related to you by blood. This includes your brothers, sisters, parents and grandparents. You don't need to include any step-parents or other step-family members or anyone who is adopted.



See the inside back cover for the Family Health History Form.



What if someone doesn't want to talk about family health history?

Not everyone wants to talk about health. Some in your family may feel that health conditions are private. If this is true in your family, tell them why you're asking about their health history. If they know why it's important to you, they may be more willing to share health information.

Why does the family health history form ask about ethnic background?

Ethnic background means the part of the world or the **ethnic groups** your **ancestors** are from. An ethnic group is a group of people, often from the same country, who share language or culture. Ancestors are family members who lived long ago, even before your grandparents.

Your ancestors may be from an ethnic group that is more likely than other groups to have certain health problems that are passed down in families. For example, sickle cell disease is more common in African-Americans than in people who aren't African-American. It's also more common in people from countries like Greece and Italy than in people from other countries. And **Tay-Sachs disease** is more common in certain Eastern European Jewish families than in families who don't have Eastern European Jewish ancestors.

Knowing information about your ancestors can help you find out about certain health conditions that you could pass to your baby.

Family events can be a great time to get your family health history.

At your next family gathering, ask everyone in your family to tell you their health histories. Go back as many generations as you can — ask about your grandparents and great grandparents.

What do you do with your family health history?

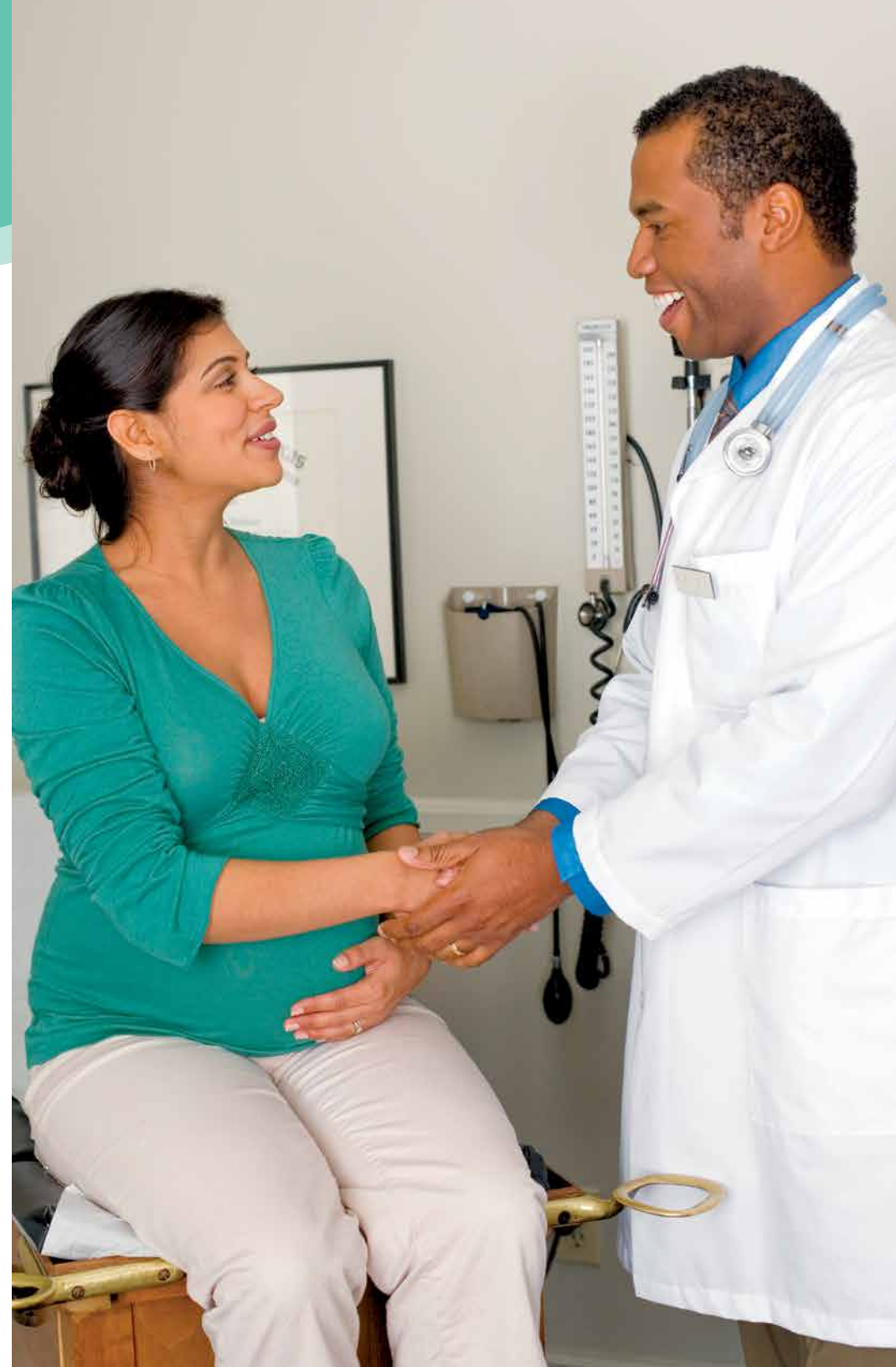
Once you've got it, share it! Show it to:

- Your health care provider — He can use it to see what health conditions run in your family. This can help him figure out if you or your baby is likely to have the same kind of health conditions.
- Your family members — It's great information for everyone in your family. It's really helpful for someone who's pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant.

Keeping track of your health history never stops. Add to it as your family grows and changes. To help make sure that your history is up to date, keep copies of:

- Medical exams, including dates and treatments
- Test results
- Medicines you take, both **prescription** and **over-the-counter**

Put the information in a folder or on your computer. The more information you have, the more complete your health history can be.





What can you do to help prevent health problems for your baby?

Only some health conditions and birth defects are passed from parents to children. Others can be caused by a pregnant woman smoking, using street drugs or being near harmful chemicals. And others just happen — we don't know the cause. Having a complete family health history can help you and your provider learn more about your health and your baby's health.

In addition to learning about your family health history, here are some things you can do before and during pregnancy to help prevent health problems for your baby:

Leah's story

My husband Tom and I had been trying to get pregnant for a year and a half. We asked my provider why it was taking so long. To help answer our question, she asked us to fill out a family health history form. We weren't sure about some of the health problems listed, so my provider explained them. I put down that my aunt has diabetes and Tom's sister has cystic fibrosis (CF).

We gave the form to my provider. She told us that CF runs in families. She said that even if Tom doesn't have CF, a gene change can affect his fertility. My provider referred Tom to a specialist. He made an appointment for testing next week. We're nervous about the CF. But we feel good that we're doing things to learn more about our health.

1. Take folic acid every day.

Taking folic acid before and during early pregnancy can help reduce certain birth defects of the brain and spine called **neural tube defects**.

Before pregnancy, take a **multivitamin** that has 400 micrograms of folic acid every day. During pregnancy, take a **prenatal vitamin** that has 600 micrograms of folic acid every day. Check the product label to make sure you're getting the right amount.

Folic acid works best before pregnancy and during the early months of pregnancy. So even if you're not thinking about or trying to get pregnant, take folic acid every day.

2. Get a medical checkup before pregnancy.

This is called a **preconception checkup**. Talk to your provider about things you can do, like eating right and exercising, to make sure you're fit and healthy before you get pregnant.

3. Make sure your vaccinations are up to date.

At your preconception checkup, ask your provider about vaccinations you may need. They help protect you from some diseases, like **Rubella** (also called German measles) and **chickenpox**, that can cause birth defects and other problems for your baby.

If it's flu season (October through May), be sure to get a flu shot. This can help protect you and your baby from serious problems caused by the flu.

4. Get early and regular prenatal care.

Prenatal care is medical care you get when you're pregnant. It lets your health care provider check on you and your baby to make sure everything's OK. Make your first prenatal care checkup as soon as you think you're pregnant. And go to all your prenatal care checkups during pregnancy, even if you're feeling fine.

5. Tell your provider about any medicines you take.

This includes prescription and over-the-counter medicines. Some medicines can be harmful to a baby during pregnancy.

If your provider is concerned about a medicine you're taking, she may want to switch you to a safer medicine.

6. Don't smoke, drink alcohol or use street drugs.

Doing these things can cause serious health problems for your baby. If you need help to quit, tell your health care provider.

7. Don't take any herbal products or teas.

We don't know enough about how these can affect a pregnancy. So it's best not to take them while you're pregnant.

8. Don't eat fish that has a lot of mercury in it.

Mercury is a chemical that can be harmful to a baby. Some fish, such as king mackerel, shark, and swordfish, have high levels of mercury. Don't eat these kinds of fish during pregnancy.

9. Don't eat undercooked meat or change a cat's litterbox.

Doing these things may cause a serious infection called **toxoplasmosis**. It's harmful to a baby.



Amy's story

At my prenatal checkup, I told my provider that my dad has a blood condition called **hemophilia**. My provider said I probably carry a gene change for the condition. He said I can get a test to find out. It's important for me to know if I have the gene change. Even though I'm healthy, I could pass the condition to my baby boy.

My provider said I can talk to a genetic counselor to learn more about how hemophilia can run in families. He also said my sister can talk to her provider about testing if she's thinking about having a baby someday.

Family health history resources

Key points to remember

For more information on family health history, check out these resources:

Does It Run in the Family?

Genetic Alliance

www.familyhealthhistory.org or 1-202-966-5557

This online tool helps you create personalized booklets to start conversations about health in your family and community.

Know Your Family Health History

American Society of Human Genetics and Genetic Alliance

www.talkhealthhistory.org or 1-866-HUM-GENE (486-4363)

This site has tools and tips to help you talk to your family and your provider about health history.

My Family Health Portrait Tool

U.S. Surgeon General's Office

<https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/fhh-web/home.action>
or 1-888-478-4423

This online tool lets you take your family health history and save it on your own computer. You can update it over time.

Your Family Health History

March of Dimes

marchofimes.com/familyhealthhistory

This site includes videos about family health history and the people who are Hispanic, Chinese and African-American.

- The best way to learn about health conditions you can pass to your baby is to take your family health history. Use the Family Health History Form at the end of this booklet or at marchofimes.com/familyhealthhistory.
- Share your family health history with your provider and other family members.
- There are things you can do to help you have a healthy pregnancy, like quitting smoking and taking a multivitamin with folic acid in it every day.



Words to know

alcohol (AL-kuh-hol) — Beer, wine, wine coolers and liquor. Examples of liquor are vodka, whiskey and bourbon.

ancestors (AN-sess-turz) — Members of your family who lived long ago, before your grandparents.

birth defects (burth dee-FEKS) — Health conditions that are present at birth. Birth defects change the shape or function of one or more parts of the body. They can cause problems in overall health, how the body develops, or in how the body works.

CF (see ef) — See cystic fibrosis.

chickenpox (CHIK-in-pawks) — A disease caused by a virus. It causes red, itchy spots on your skin.

cleft lip (kleft lip) — A birth defect in which a baby's upper lip has a hole in it.

cystic fibrosis (SIS-tik fye-BROH-siss) — Also called CF. A condition that affects breathing and digestion. Parents can pass this condition on to their children.

diabetes (dye-uh-BEE-teez) — Having too much sugar in your blood. Too much sugar in your blood can damage organs in your body, including blood vessels, nerves, eyes and kidneys.

ethnic background (ETH-nik BAK-ground) — The part of the world or the ethnic groups your ancestors are from.

ethnic group (ETH-nik groop) — A group of people, often from the same country, who share language or culture.

family health history (FAM-i-lee helth HISS-tuh-ree) — A record of any health conditions and treatments that you, your partner and everyone in both of your families have had.

fertility (fur-TIL-uh-tee) — A couple's ability to get pregnant.

folic acid (FOH-lik ASS-id) — A vitamin that every cell in your body needs for healthy growth and development. If taken before pregnancy and during early pregnancy, it can help protect your baby from birth defects of the brain and spine called neural tube defects (NTDs). Take a vitamin pill with 400 micrograms of folic acid in it each day before pregnancy and during the first few weeks of pregnancy.

gene (jeen) — A part of your body's cells that store instructions for the way your body grows, looks and works. Genes are passed from parents to children.

gene change (jeen chaynj) — Also called mutation. A change to instructions that are stored in a gene that can sometimes cause birth defects and other health conditions.

genetic counselor (juh-NET-ik KOWN-si-lur) — A person who is trained to help you understand about genes, birth defects and other medical conditions that run in families, and how they can affect your health and your baby's health.

health care provider (helth kair pruh-VYE-dur) — Also called provider. The person who gives you medical care.

hemophilia (hee-moh-FEEL-ee-yuh) — A blood condition that causes blood not to clot. This means you can't stop bleeding if you cut yourself or get hurt. Parents can pass this condition to their children. The condition is more common in males than in females.

herbal product (UR-buhl PRAH-dukt) — A product, like a pill or tea, that is made from herbs. Don't use herbal products during pregnancy or if you're trying to get pregnant.

high blood pressure (hye bluhd PRESH-ur) — Also called hypertension. High blood pressure is when the force of blood against the walls of your blood vessels is too high. It can stress your heart and cause problems during pregnancy.

inherit (in-HAIR-it) — Getting traits or medical conditions from your parents. For example, you inherit hair and eye color and some diseases from your parents.

intellectual disabilities (in-tuh-LEK-choo-uhl diss-uh-BIL-i-teez) — Problems with how the brain works that can cause a person to have trouble learning, communicating, taking care of himself and getting along with others.

mercury (MUR-kyur-ee) — A metal that is often found in water. You can get mercury from eating certain fish. Swordfish, shark, king mackerel and tilefish all have a lot of mercury. Don't eat these kinds of fish when you're pregnant.

multivitamin (muhl-tee-VYE-tuh-min) — A pill that contains many vitamins (like vitamins B and C) and minerals (like iron and calcium) that help your body stay healthy.

mutation (myoo-TAY-shuhn) — See gene change.

neural tube defect (NUR-uhl toob dee-FEKT) — Also called NTD. A birth defect in the neural tube. The neural tube is part of a developing baby that becomes the brain and spine. Examples of NTDs are spina bifida and anencephaly.

over-the-counter medicine (OH-vur-thuh-KOWN-tur MED-i-sin) — Medicine, like pain relievers or cough syrup, you can buy without a prescription. Don't take any medicine during pregnancy without talking to your health care provider.

PE (pee-ee) — See pulmonary embolism.

preconception checkup (PREE-kuhn-sep-shuhn CHEK-uhp) — A medical checkup to help make sure you are healthy before you get pregnant.

prenatal care (PREE-nay-tuhl kair) — Medical care you get during pregnancy.

prenatal vitamin (PREE-nay-tuhl VYE-tuh-min) — A vitamin made for pregnant women.

prescription (pri-SKRIP-shuhn) — An order for medicine written by a health care provider.

provider (pruh-VYE-dur) — See health care provider.

pulmonary embolism (PUHL-muh-nair-ee EM-boh-liz-uhm) — Also called PE. The sudden blockage of an artery in the lung. Arteries are blood vessels that carry blood from your heart to other parts of your body.

rubella (roo-BEL-uh) — Also called German measles. A disease caused by a virus.

sickle cell disease (SIK-uhl sel di-ZEEZ) — A blood condition that causes red blood cells to be shaped like a "C." Parents can pass this condition to their children.

spinal muscular atrophy (SPY-nuhl MUS-kyoo-ler A-troe-pee) — A group of conditions that cause muscle damage and weakness. It eventually leads to death. Parents can pass this condition to their children.

street drug (street druhg) — A drug that is against the law to have or use. Illegal drugs include marijuana, cocaine and heroin.

Tay-Sachs disease (tay saks di-ZEEZ) — A condition that causes nerve cells in the brain and spine to die. Parents can pass this condition on to their children.

thalassemia (thal-uh-SEE-mee-uh) — A blood condition that causes the body to make fewer healthy red blood cells and less hemoglobin than normal. Hemoglobin is a protein in red blood cells. Parents can pass this condition to their children.

toxoplasmosis (tahks-oh-plaz-MOH-siss) — An infection you can get from eating undercooked meat or touching cat poop.

trait (trayt) — A characteristic that makes one person different from another. For example, hair and eye color are traits.

vaccination (VAK-suh-nay-shuhn) — Medicine you or your baby gets that protects against certain diseases.

Von Willenbrand disease (vahn WIL-en-brand di-ZEEZ) — A bleeding condition that can be passed from parents to children. It's the most common inherited bleeding condition.



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Family Health History Form



Fill out both sides of this form about you, your partner and your families.
Read the directions for each section — they contain important information.

Date _____

This form does not replace the health history form that you fill out at your health care provider’s office. But you can use it to get started on your family health history. Share the form with your provider — it gives helpful information about health conditions that run in your family. It’s OK if you can’t answer all the questions on the form. Do the best you can.

About you and your partner

| | You | Your partner |
|--|--|--|
| Name | | |
| Date of birth | | |
| Job | | |
| Marital status (single, married, divorced, widowed) | | |
| Last grade of school completed | | |
| Adopted | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |

Ethnic background: Put a ✓ in the box or boxes if you or your partner has ancestors from these ethnic backgrounds. This information is important because some diseases, like sickle cell and Tay-Sachs, run in people from certain backgrounds or parts of the world. It’s OK to check more than one box.

| | You | Your partner |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| African or African-American | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Ashkenazi Jewish | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Cajun or French Canadian | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| European Caucasian (from England, Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Hispanic (from Central or South America, Mexico, Puerto Rico, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Indian (from India) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mediterranean (from Greece, Italy, Turkey, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Middle Eastern (from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Native American | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Southeast Asian (from China, Laos, Vietnam, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other. Please write it here: | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I don’t know. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Medicines and supplements: List all for you and your partner. Write the name of the medicine or supplement and how often and how much you take. If there are none, write “none.” If you don’t know, write “don’t know.”

| | | What? How often? How much? If there are none, write “none.” If you don’t know, write “don’t know.” |
|--|--------------|--|
| Prescription medicine | You | |
| | Your partner | |
| Over-the-counter medicine | You | |
| | Your partner | |
| Multivitamin, prenatal vitamin or other supplement | You | |
| | Your partner | |

Harmful substances: List all for you and your partner. Write the name of the substance, and how often and how much you use or are exposed to it. If there are none, write “none.” If you don’t know, write “don’t know.”

| | | What? How often? How much? If there are none, write “none.” If you don’t know, write “don’t know.” |
|---|--------------|--|
| Smoking | You | |
| | Your partner | |
| Alcohol (beer, wine, liquor) | You | |
| | Your partner | |
| Street drugs (marijuana, cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, etc.) | You | |
| | Your partner | |
| Chemicals you use (weed killer, paint, paint thinner, turpentine, etc.) | You | |
| | Your partner | |

Health conditions: Put a ✓ in the “yes,” “no” or “don’t know” box for any health conditions you, your partner or your family members have now or have had in the past. In the last column, write the family member who has the condition and which side of the family the person is from. Family members are anyone related to you by blood. Do not include family members who are adopted or part of your step-family.

| | Yes | No | Don't know | Tell us as much as you know about the person, such as the relationship to you and the person's age when the condition started. |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Example: High blood pressure | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | My dad's sister, 45 years old |
| Autism | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Birth defects, including heart defects or spina bifida | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Blindness from birth or before age 40 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Blood clots or deep vein thrombosis (DVT) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Cancer, such as breast, ovarian or colon | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Cystic fibrosis (CF) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Deafness from birth or before age 40 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Diabetes | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Early menopause (before age 40) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Heart disease, including heart attack | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Hemophilia | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| High blood pressure | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Intellectual disabilities, including Fragile X syndrome or learning disabilities | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Mental illness, such as depression or anxiety | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Pulmonary embolism (PE) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Repeat pregnancy losses (miscarriage, stillbirth) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Sickle cell disease | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Spinal muscular atrophy | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Stroke | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Sudden, unexpected death as an adult or child | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Tay-Sachs | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Thalassemia, a type of anemia | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| von Willebrand disease | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |

If you, your partner or someone in your families has a medical condition that is not listed above, please write about it here: _____

Have you or anyone in your family had a premature baby (born before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy)?
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

Have you, your partner or anyone in your families had genetic testing? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know
If yes, please explain: _____

Are you and your partner first cousins or in any other way blood relatives? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If yes, please explain how you are related: _____