

How to start a conversation about your family health history



Use this guide to start this important conversation, identify patterns in your family's cancer history, and have an informed discussion with your GP about your cancer risk.

What questions to ask:

1. Have any of your blood relatives had cancer? The closer the blood relatives who developed cancer, especially at a younger age, the more likely the cancer is due to an inherited gene fault.
2. What type of cancer were they diagnosed with? Breast, ovarian, prostate, pancreatic or bowel cancers are more likely to be due to an inherited gene fault.
3. The age at which cancers in the family developed. The younger people were when they developed cancer (compared to what is expected in the general community), the more likely it is to be due to hereditary factors. Before 50 is considered "early" for the development of breast and ovarian cancers.

Note: The more cancer patterns that are present, the more likely it is that there is an inherited faulty gene in the family causing a higher-than-usual chance of cancer. However, it is not definite. It is important to know that some people who inherit a faulty gene that causes an increased chance of cancer, never go on to develop cancer.

How to have a conversation with your family members:

- Choose an appropriate time and situation to ask for the information. Approach your conversations with sensitivity when discussing health matters with relatives.
- Consider all family members, including the men in your family, as they can also carry a genetic mutation and be at risk of hereditary cancer.
- Remember to respect your family's wishes, if they are uncomfortable discussing their health. You may be able to gather partial information from other family members.
- Write the information down and add it to your list as new information is found. Our Family Health Map is a helpful tool to organise your family's health history.
- Don't worry if your list is incomplete. You may have lost contact with some relatives, or older generations may have passed, making it impossible to find out information about their health history. In this case, it is still worth recording everything you can, as your family health history document will benefit future generations in your family.



Who to ask about family history:

When documenting your Family Health History, you should consider the health history of family members related to you by blood only.

This includes:

- Grandparents
- Father, Mother
- Sister/s, Brother/s
- Children
- Aunts, Uncles, Cousins

It is crucial for understanding your cancer risk to be aware of the health of your first-degree (immediate) relatives. Your first-degree relatives, including your parents, siblings, and children. Second-degree relatives, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.