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Heart Health and What Family History Can Tell You

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We all know that our blue eyes came from Granddad, and that dimple in our chin came from mom; but did you also know that your heart health may also be inherited?

Research has shown that a person with both a first degree relative (like a parent or sibling) who suffered from heart disease before age 60, and a second degree relative like an aunt, uncle, or grandparent with a similar profile, is nearly ten times as likely to suffer from heart disease early in life than someone whose family history includes no heart disease. Knowing if a relative has experienced heart disease can make you more aware of actions that might be needed to prevent or minimize heart disease in yourself. Family history is a determining factor in people who may develop heart disease.

Are you at risk? What is a *Family History*? A Family History is a record of your current and past illnesses, and those of your parents, brothers, sisters, children, and other blood relatives. A family health history shows the pattern of certain diseases in a family, and helps to determine risk factors for those and other diseases. It is like looking through a window into your own future.

Acquiring this information about family heart disease can be pivotal for determining risk factors and treating problems if they exist. A person who has a family history of heart disease may receive more intensive treatment than someone without a family history but whose risk profile otherwise looks the same. For example, patient A may have high cholesterol, but no family history of heart disease. In this patient, delaying cholesterol medication and trying therapeutic lifestyle modifications including diet and exercise first may be acceptable. However, patient B with known family history of heart disease may need to start cholesterol-lowering medication immediately.

The American Heart Association has identified several risk factors for heart disease. Major risk factors are those that research has shown to significantly increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. Other factors are associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, but their significance and prevalence haven't yet been precisely determined. They're called contributing risk factors. Some of them can be modified, treated, or controlled, and some can't. The more risk factors you have, the greater your chance of developing coronary heart disease.

Talk to your family and find out your Family History. You may find there is a strong association in your family of heart disease. Although there are no national guidelines for screening and treating individuals with a family history of cardiovascular disease, individuals with a family history of premature coronary heart disease (before 55 for men and before 65 for women) need a comprehensive examination and screening to evaluate for other risk factors that can contribute to heart disease. That means finding out about cholesterol and blood pressure levels and keeping weight under control. Talk to your healthcare provider about your family health history and make a personalized plan to maintain your health for today and for generations to come.

Dr. Westmoreland earned her bachelor's degree from North Georgia College and State University in Dahlonega and graduated with honors from Mercer University School of Medicine in Macon. She completed her internship and residency at Duke University School of Medicine in Durham, North Carolina, and a fellowship in Cardiovascular Medicine at Emory University in Atlanta, where she also served as the chief fellow. She has just joined the Northeast Georgia Heart Center (www.ngheartcenter.com) and will be seeing patients at the Cumming and Dahlonega offices, as well as one day a week in Gainesville.