

Outsmart Your Bad Health Genes

Whether you've lost a loved one to an illness or someone in your family suffers from a chronic medical condition, you may wonder whether you're doomed to face the same fate. Take a deep breath; rest assured that while your genes may put you at higher risk for certain diseases, they don't necessarily cause them. This means that to a large degree you can take control over your health, starting today.

Are You at Risk?

If you suspect that you might be at risk for a certain disease, such as heart disease or cancer, do some detective work and find out whether any close relatives, such as parents, grandparents or siblings, have a condition that may be genetically linked. Be sure to share this information with your health care provider so he or she can suggest regular checkups or specific tests for that medical condition.

And remember, many diseases aren't due to genetics alone. Causes are often a combination of genetic factors and lifestyle habits, such as being overweight or obese, drinking too much alcohol, or eating an unhealthy diet.

Take Control

Once you've identified the diseases that run in your family as well as some of the habits that also raise your risk, it's time to start making some changes. For example, you can do the following:

- Eat more nutrient-rich foods, such as fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy.
- Limit your alcohol intake to no more than two drinks per day if you're a man and one drink per day if you're a woman.
- Increase the amount of moderate-intensity physical activity you get, aiming for 150 minutes every week. (Consult your doctor before beginning an exercise plan.)
- Most importantly, work with your health care provider to identify your health risks based on your family history and lifestyle habits.

No matter what might be lurking in your DNA, taking small steps to improve your well-being can protect your health today and for many years to come.

Sources include American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive Kidney Diseases, American Psychological Association, U.S. National Library of Medicine.

