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7 Questions You Should Ask Your Mom About Her Health ASAP

Your family's health history can offer clues into your own well-being.



When it comes to assessing your risk for a variety of health conditions and diseases, your parents can provide a wealth of information that can help doctors to treat you correctly. This is especially true for your mom and her side of the family tree.

Not all health problems have a genetic component, but understanding more about your maternal health history can help you to understand your own body better and make predictions for the future. But first, you need to ask the right questions.

Below are the inquiries health professionals suggest that you put to your mom ASAP to gain better knowledge about your own health outcomes:

1. “How’s your heart health?”

It can be hard to talk about the death of a loved one, but if someone in your family died unexpectedly, that information could reflect your own health, said Nicole Harkin, a board-certified cardiologist, lipidologist and clinical assistant professor at New York University.

Harkin said you should ask your parents for any history of heart disease, stroke or the death of a family member before the age of 55 in men or 65 in women. This is considered a “premature” death and needs to be noted by your doctor. However, Harkin also said you shouldn’t panic, even if you hear bad news.

“Genetics are by no means destiny for many of us,” Harkin said. “It’s important to be aware of any significant family history and, in turn, minimize any other risk factors possible with a healthy diet and lifestyle.”

2. “What was your experience like with your period and menopause?”

It might seem like a health myth, but it’s actually true that your own mother’s menstrual cycle is closely connected to your own. If she started her periods at a later age, you likely did, too. In mid-life, your cycle may mirror the pattern your mother’s took at menopause.

Felice Gersh, an OB/GYN and the director of the Integrative Medical Practice of Irvine in California, said you should also ask your mom about any history of polycystic ovary syndrome, or PCOS, which is a hormonal disorder. PCOS increases your chance of experiencing a large array of metabolic, mood, fertility and pregnancy problems, according to Gersh.

“PCOS is the most common endocrine dysfunction of women, and the daughters of women with PCOS have much higher rates of developing it themselves than the average woman,” Gersh said.

3. “Did you have any pregnancy or birth problems?”

Your mother’s experience with pregnancy — including any fertility issues, birth, breastfeeding and the postpartum period — could provide important clues for your own gynecological and obstetrical health, according to [Daniel Roshan](#), a high-risk maternal-fetal medicine OB/GYN in New York.

“Many conditions are genetic,” Roshan said. “For pregnant patients, it’s good to be aware of what their own mother’s pregnancy was like, any complications or issues they may have had like cervical insufficiency, preterm labor or recurrent pregnancy losses. [It] could place her at a higher risk.”

4. “Have you ever had cancer?”

You might think that if your mom had any type of cancer, you would have heard about it. But she may have had a small treatable cancer when you were young or before you were born that she has never shared. You should also ask about any family history of different cancers, said [Laurie Jeffers](#), a clinical assistant professor at New York University’s Rory Meyers College of Nursing.

“Many genetic predispositions to female cancers — ovarian, breast — can be passed from either the mother or the father’s side, like the mutation in BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes, which account for up to 15 percent of breast and ovarian cancers,” Jeffers said.

Pre-screening for a number of conditions typically takes place after about age 50, but if you have a family history of a particular disease you may be offered early testing, said [Niket Sonpal](#), an adjunct assistant professor at Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine based in New York. For example, if you have a first-degree relative — like a parent, brother, sister or child — who had colorectal cancer before the age of 60, or two first-degree relatives diagnosed at any age, you should begin screening for colon cancer earlier, typically at age 40.

“Early screening can save your life, and having a family history means you are at higher risk. However, having a risk factor, or even many, does not mean that you are sure to get the disease,” Sonpal said.

5. “Do you get migraines?”

We all get headaches from time to time, but a migraine is no ordinary headache. Usually accompanied by a range of other symptoms such as vision problems, nausea, and sensitivity to light, the pain from a migraine can last for hours and leave you exhausted for days. According to [The Migraine Research Foundation](#), migraines can run in families, and 90 percent of sufferers have a family history of them.

“Many people do not recognize their headaches as migraines, and suffer with suboptimal medication,” Sonpal said. “Knowing that you have a family history could help you to get the right treatment sooner.”

6. “Do you have any skin problems?”

Skin care requires more than face masks. It’s important to talk with your mom about her skin health, including any moles she has had removed or any incidents of skin cancer, said [Tsippora Shainhouse](#), board-certified dermatologist in Los Angeles.

“It is important to know if you have a family history of melanoma in first-degree relatives, including parents and siblings,” Shainhouse said. “If you do, be sure to have your skin checked annually, and more frequently if you have had suspicious lesions of your own.”

7. “What’s your mental health history?”

Traditionally, many people have found it very difficult to talk about mental health, but it’s absolutely vital to do so. Your mom may have struggled at times with depression or other mental health issues and felt unable to talk openly about her symptoms. Now is the time to shrug off any stigma associated with mental health discussions and talk about this important part of your overall well-being.

“Mental health is an important part of a comprehensive medical history,” Jeffers said. “Any history of depression, addiction, anxiety or mood disorders is highly relevant, since these issues can affect not only individuals but families as well.”

How To Broach These Conversations



If you have a good relationship with your mother, having this conversation may be relatively easy. But for others, it can be an awkward and potentially upsetting experience.

Mary Jean Vorwald, an on-site physician at Activate Healthcare in Indianapolis, said there are a few tips you can follow to make sure it goes smoothly. Start by picking a time and location where you can have an uninterrupted, confidential conversation for about an hour or so. Explain that it’s recommended that you find out as much as you can about your family medical history.

Vorwald recommended having this conversation sooner rather than later. This may be particularly important before you have kids, so you're aware of any congenital diseases. And finally, remember to repeat this discussion every five to 10 years to see if anything has changed or developed.

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