Miriam Weiner

Knowing your family health history could save your life. Researchers now are studying family trees to get to the root of genetic diseases. The value of family medical histories is evident for anyone who has visited a physician or been confined in a hospital. The questions asked immediately after "What's bothering you?" have to do with whether or not your parents are alive or deceased; if the latter, the cause of death; and the state of health of brothers and sisters. You also will be asked about the illnesses associated with your grandparents, and the cause of their deaths.

This is not a simple exercise in medical inquisitiveness. Your responses become a permanent part of your own medical history. As can be seen, genetics can play a vital role in your life.

If the roots of your family tree are diseased with such common problems as heart disease, strokes, high blood pressure, cancer, glaucoma, or diabetes, it may be possible for you to take steps to postpone getting the disease or to prevent it altogether.

By researching your family's health tree, you can provide family members with a medical genealogy containing important information about the health history of your ancestors.

These data can be used in many ways. For example, knowing that a certain illness "runs in the family" can guide you to good preventive health care.

Genetic diseases have developed as a result of historical and geographical circumstances. When a community has been isolated over a period of time and there is consanguinity—a pattern of marriage among close relatives, such as first cousins, or uncle and niece—it is not unusual for genetic conditions and diseases to develop. In general, all people carry eight to 10 genes for possible diseases, but they are usually not displayed.

It is a legacy money cannot buy.

The benefits of tracing your family health tree can extend far beyond the medical knowledge gained. It is a good family project. The hours spent looking through old records, and jogging family memories, can help build a strong feeling of family satisfaction and pride.

Most importantly, it will give your descendants something precious that may make a great difference in their lives. It is a legacy money cannot buy.

For further reference, see Genetic Diseases Among Ashkenazi Jews (1979), edited by Richard M. Goodman, M.D. and Arno G. Motulsky, M.D. It is available from Raven Press, 1155 Avenue of the Americas, 37th Floor, New York, NY 10036 (470 pp., $71.50); and Genetic Disorders Among the Jewish People by Richard M. Goodman, M.D. (1979), The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD 21218 (560 pp., $32.50).

A Beginner's Guide (56 pages) on how to research your family history—including charts, a list of archives and libraries, maps, bibliography, family group sheets, and more—can be ordered from Miriam Weiner, in care of this paper (cost: $10).

Miriam Weiner is a columnist and lecturer specializing in Jewish genealogy and Holocaust research. For information on how to research your family history, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Weiner, c/o San Diego Jewish Times, 2592 Fletcher Parkway, El Cajon, CA 92020.