

# FAMILY HEALTH HISTORY

May 2017

## Tip of the Month

*A family tree that was created to trace one's genealogy or ancestry can be used to develop a family health history (or vice versa). Lots of different information can be recorded for your personal use (though the version for your healthcare provider will generally record only information relevant to your health). Place of birth, occupation, pictures and other information can be recorded for members of your family. With some online programs, documents can also be stored (e.g., birth certificate, military draft, baptism record, etc.) .*

## What is a Pedigree?

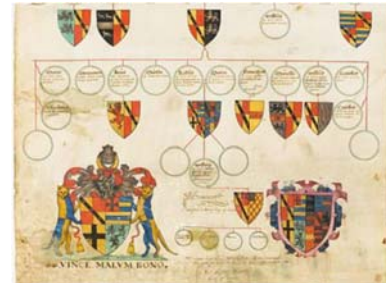
The word 'pedigree' is derived from the Latin 'ped' (meaning foot) and French word 'grue' (crane). The crane's foot represented the connections between the parent and each offspring. Historically, pedigrees were used to document one's ancestry or line of descent by showing multiple generations of a family. Often referred to as a 'family tree,' horizontal lines are used to connect family members in the same generation and vertical lines to indicate descendants.

Thus, one could figure out the relationship (or relatedness) between any two family members by following the lines (i.e., uncle-niece).



Prior to the use of symbols, family records were often written in prose or simply memorized or passed down in song. Shapes were later used to depict gender (squares for males and circles for females). Pedigrees are not limited to human use, and are often used to document the breeding history of livestock, dogs, and other prized animals.

In medieval times, individuals of certain families could rightfully bear a coat of arms in England with proof of ancestry, typically recorded in pedigrees. Land ownership was also included in genealogical records and taxation was determined based on these records. In addition, the church typically stored and recorded genealogical information, particularly the extensive royal family pedigrees.



When pedigrees began to be used to record health information, additional symbols were created. Individuals affected with a disease were often shaded (e.g., solid circle or square) and individuals who were deceased had a diagonal line drawn through the shape. With the use of a standard set of symbols, less text was needed to include health information enabling patterns of disease inheritance to be rapidly identified. For example, a family with a genetic condition like Huntington's disease would have individuals shaded in multiple generations. For some other diseases, only males may be affected and thus, only squares would be shaded.

While family health history can also be displayed in other formats like a bulleted list or table, the pedigree can easily illustrate multiple types of information that can be quickly reviewed. Twenty years ago, genetic counselors would gather information about family health history from the patient and draw the pedigree! Thankfully, several software programs exist today including Duke's MeTree tool that can convert the information entered online by the patient or healthcare provider into a pedigree.