When completing a family history, it is important to include information about how old a relative is when diagnosed with a disease. With some diseases, such as breast cancer or Alzheimer’s, young age can suggest that genetics may be involved. Screening recommendations for early-onset (develop at a young age) often differ from those for late onset (develop later in life). Thus, specifying the age of onset helps your health care provider determine the right screening options for you.

Electronic Family Health History

Thanks to electronic medical records and many doctors’ offices switching to digital intake (where they provide you with a tablet to complete the required insurance and medical forms), completing one’s family history has become less burdensome for patients. Instead of just checking yes/no for every condition listed on a form, completing a family health history electronically may help provide a more complete history. Pop-up questions remind us to think about each family member and what conditions they are affected with and/or caused their death. It’s particularly important to provide information about family members in multiple generations (e.g., grandparents, great-parents) to determine if a condition is “running” in your family. Important details like the age when the person developed the disease, the type of disease if there’s more than one kind (like diabetes), smoking status, and other important contributing factors that can be easier to recall when prompted. When complete, the information can be easily displayed in a table or pedigree (a diagram of the entire family) that can also be shared with other family members. The information is also easier to update since it is saved - you can just add any new information to your current record at your next office visit.

This type of electronic family health history tool has been developed by researchers at Duke University and is currently being tested in multiple locations across the U.S. and in Singapore. Called MeTree, researchers have found that patients have had no trouble completing their family health history, and the information is far more complete than that obtained through paper-based forms. Patients can even complete the information in advance of their visit and update it at their convenience.

Just as important as developing an easy-to-use tool for patients is to help doctors quickly analyze the information during the office visit and make recommendations to prevent or catch disease early. Depending on the type of family history, different recommendations for screening, testing, referral, or lifestyle changes may be needed. The electronic family history tool will analyze the information provided by the patient and based on professional guidelines, generate recommendations for the doctor to review and discuss with the patient. As recommendations can change occasionally, this helps doctors make recommendations based on the latest guidelines.