



Mott Poll Report

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Using Family Health History to Improve Child Health

A child's family health history may help parents and healthcare providers decide whether and how to address certain medical and mental health conditions. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children 1-18 years about their attitudes and experiences regarding their family health history.

Parents feel slightly more knowledgeable about their child's family medical history (63%) than mental health history (57%). One in five parents (21%) say that their child has been diagnosed with a condition that runs in the family, while 48% express concerns about their child developing a hereditary condition. Parents think family history puts their child at higher risk for allergies (41%), mental health conditions (33%), attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (23%), obesity (22%), heart disease (20%), cancer (20%), alcoholism (18%), autoimmune conditions (13%), autism (6%), or other chronic conditions (29%).

One-quarter of parents (25%) think that they can prevent their child from developing a condition that runs in the family. In light of family health history, parents report trying to make sure their child eats a healthy diet (51%) and gets enough exercise (48%), watching for signs of certain conditions (42%), and 9% report asking relatives about their experiences with conditions that run in the family. One-quarter of parents (26%) say they have asked healthcare providers to test or examine their child for conditions based on their family history, and 7% say they sought genetic testing for their child.

Parents recall that their child's healthcare provider included a form about family history in their registration packet (59%) or asked questions about it during a healthcare visit (65%). Twelve percent of parents say the child's provider has not asked about family history, while 15% feel the provider does not know enough about their family health history. Two-thirds (69%) would like their child's provider to suggest things parents can do to prevent their child from developing health conditions that run in the family.

Among parents of a child 12-18 years, 65% report talking with that child about their family medical history while 49% talked about their family mental health history. Two-thirds of parents (64%) think their child 12-18 years could fill out a form about their family health history with parent help, while 11% feel they could fill out a family history form by themselves.

Parent efforts to reduce risk of hereditary conditions in their children



Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital
National Poll on Children's Health, 2024

Report Highlights

2 in 3 parents want their child's healthcare provider to suggest ways to prevent their child from developing hereditary health conditions.

Parents feel slightly more knowledgeable about their child's family health history for medical conditions than mental health.

Nearly half of parents express concerns about their child potentially developing a hereditary condition.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in February 2024 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 1-18 years living in their household (n=2,057). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 61% among panel members contacted to participate. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±1 to 3 percentage points.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

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C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

Co-Director:

Sarah J. Clark, MPH

Co-Director:

Susan J. Woolford, MD, MPH

Design Lead:

Sara L. Schultz, MPS

Data Analyst:

Acham Gebremariam, MS



**SUSAN B. MEISTER
CHILD HEALTH EVALUATION
AND RESEARCH CENTER**
MICHIGAN MEDICINE

Implications

A child's family health history is a record of health information about the child and his or her close paternal and maternal relatives. Family health history can help both parents and providers determine whether a child may be at an increased risk of developing a particular condition.

Parents play a key role in understanding and addressing their child's health concerns, including those related to hereditary conditions. One in five parents in this Mott Poll reported their child has been diagnosed with a hereditary condition, while nearly half of parents expressed concerns about their child potentially developing such a condition. This reflects the need for parents to be equipped with accurate information about their family health history.

A family health history can identify children with a higher-than-usual chance of having common medical disorders, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, certain cancers, obesity, and type 2 diabetes. However, these are complex disorders influenced by a combination of genetic factors, environmental conditions, and lifestyle choices. With knowledge of their child's family health history, parents can take steps to reduce their child's risk, such as early screenings, genetic counseling, encouraging healthy eating and exercise habits, and being aware of signs for these conditions.

Having a hereditary predisposition to an illness may prompt parents to be more careful with certain choices than others might be, who have a different family history. However, it should be emphasized that for many conditions that run in families, the likelihood of youth developing the condition, or the extent to which they suffer from it, can be significantly impacted by the health habits they adopt. A child's pediatrician can be a resource to help optimize their health and avoid some of the illnesses experienced by their family members.

Although many mental health conditions have a genetic component, parents in this Mott Poll felt slightly more knowledgeable about their child's family health history for medical conditions than mental health. Additionally, parents of older children report talking about family medical history more often than family mental health history with their child. This may reflect mental health stigma represented across generations and cultures in which there is reluctance among family members to openly discuss their mental health history. Parents can normalize discussions about mental health by integrating them into everyday conversations and encourage open and honest communication within the family about mental health.

An easy way to get information about family health history is to talk to relatives about their health. A family gathering could be a good time to discuss these issues. In particular, it is important to stay current on the illnesses that occur in first- and second-degree relatives (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles). It is important to keep this information up-to-date and to share it with a healthcare provider regularly.

Parents in this Mott Poll think their child 12-18 years could fill out a form about their family health history with parent help. In emergency situations where medical records might not be readily available, it is important for children to be knowledgeable about their family history as it may be crucial for healthcare providers to make informed decisions about treatment options. Encouraging children to learn about their family health history early on can also empower them to take control of their health and make informed decisions throughout their lives.