



The Communication Group plc

Woman & Home Magazine  
November 2010  
Circ: 369,321



know the facts

# Will you inherit your MOTHER'S HEALTH?

As doctors and scientists discover more about the way our genetic code influences our health, it's tempting to think we can't control our fate. Victoria Lambert asks the experts how much of our future wellbeing is down to our parents

## SHOULD I WORRY ABOUT HEART DISEASE?

Family history is important when it comes to predicting your chance of coronary heart disease (CHD), says Dr Mike Knapton, associate medical director of the British Heart Foundation, with faulty genes as likely to come from your mother or father. "There's no doubt that if your parents suffered from heart disease, you have an increased risk."

However, other factors are more important. "The major determinants are age, smoking, diet, physical activity, high

blood pressure and high cholesterol. If either parent suffered from familial hypercholesterolemia (high cholesterol), you have a 50 per cent chance of inheriting it, which means you could get premature heart disease as a child, and could die in your forties or fifties," he says.

The good news, says Dr Knapton: "Is that you can reduce your risk of dying from CHD, even if it's in your genes, through measures such as increasing exercise and stopping smoking. A survey found that premature mortality due to cardiovascular disease was dropping in the past few years. The improvement was ascribed 60 per cent to better lifestyle." See [bhf.org.uk/women](http://bhf.org.uk/women),

## ARE BREAST AND GYNAE CANCERS INHERITED?

Breast and ovarian cancer are probably about five per cent inherited, says consultant gynaecology oncologist Mr Simon Crawford of Spire Southampton. "So 95 per cent are sporadic, and mostly age related, as cancer is caused by the failure of the body's self-regulating repair process." He adds that with breast cancer, one in 1,000 cases may be caused by use of hormone replacement therapies, and obesity may also play a part, but for ovarian cancer, "it comes down mostly to bad luck."

Endometrial and vulval cancers are linked to lifestyle. "For endometrial cancer, obesity is a key factor," he explains. "And vulval is mostly seen in the very elderly, even those in their nineties, and is largely due to smoking." >>

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### HISTORY OF MIGRAINES?

This condition is highly genetic, says Dr Andrew Dowson, head of Migraine Action's Medical Advisory Board ([migraine.org.uk](http://migraine.org.uk)). "Migraine is a common condition – every woman has a 20 per cent chance of suffering from it. But, if one of your parents had migraines, the chance doubles to 40 per cent and, if both parents had it, that risk doubles again to 80 per cent."

Taking control of your lifestyle, however, can decide how many migraines (and how often) you endure. Dr Dowson explains: "Triggers that set off migraine tend to be varied and unpredictable, usually related to physiological or environmental change. For women, that may be a swing in your hormones or simply getting dehydrated, not eating regularly or getting stressed. This is because migraines originate in the hypothalamus, the area of the brain that logs changes in your homeostasis (your state of being)."

By recognising and limiting triggers, you can help reduce your chance of migraine – even if your family has a propensity to them.

### AND ALZHEIMER'S?

"Genetics play a role in 50 to 60 per cent of cases," says consultant psychiatrist Dr William Shanahan of Capio Nightingale Hospital, London. "If you have a close family member with Alzheimer's, there's a greater likelihood of you suffering from it than not. However, lifestyle factors can cause other types of the disease, such as brain damage through alcohol abuse, or infections that lead to dementia (such as CJD). These are risks that aren't passed on. Research continues, but sadly, we know of nothing yet that can halt Alzheimer's."

### CAN GUM DISEASE RUN IN FAMILIES?

The jury is out on how much gum disease is decided by genetics, although some figures suggest it accounts for about 30 per cent of cases. It's certainly true that "poor teeth" seem to run in families, says Ipswich-based dentist Malcolm Harbour. However, no one is sure how much is nature or nurture: "It's almost impossible to predict who'll inherit the same problems as their parents. There are variables involved, from differences in saliva to the bacteria in our mouths. Plus, we all have different standards of oral hygiene."

But you can take control, even if you have a family history of dental visits. "Brush at least once a day properly – that means slowly, thoughtfully and gently, tackling each tooth in turn – to prevent gum disease," says Mr Harbour.

### AM I AT RISK OF OSTEOPOROSIS?

According to the National Osteoporosis Society, if one of your parents has broken a hip, you may be more susceptible to developing osteoporosis and fragile bones – although the degree of risk is still not known. Consultant orthopaedic surgeon John Davidson of Spire Liverpool Hospital Bone and Joint Clinic, says: "You can decrease the rate at which your bones become fragile. Too much alcohol and not enough weight-bearing exercise are bad for bone density. But getting lots of vitamin D, particularly through sunshine, is."

### WHAT'S MY RISK OF ARTHRITIS?

"There are more than 250 arthritic conditions – most have a genetic connection," says consultant rheumatologist Dr Andrew Bowden of BMI Highfield Hospital and Beaumont Hospital. "Inflammatory types of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA), are so strongly heritable that if one close relative has the condition, your risk factor doubles. More than one relative; it quadruples."

He adds: "Arthritis affects different parts of the body; if you get arthritis in your hands, that's far more common in women and strongly linked to genes."

Lifestyle can help symptoms, says Dr Bowden: "Being overweight won't cause osteoarthritis in your knees, but it can make pain worse, so losing a few pounds helps. There's excellent treatment for RA, so for swelling, tenderness and redness in any joint that lasts more than a week, get help."

### CAN DEPRESSION BE PASSED ON?

"There is thought to be a ten per cent higher chance of inheriting depression in women than men," says consultant psychiatrist Dr William Shanahan.

"No one is really sure why – partly because depression is such a complex condition." And while lifestyle factors such as sleeplessness, stress and alcohol can trigger depression, so addressing them can help treat the condition, nothing can prevent it.

"If your mother suffered from it," says Dr Shanahan, "you could look at her experience for warning signs, and adjust your lifestyle sooner."

### MY MOTHER HAD EARLY MENOPAUSE, WILL I?

Most women will reach menopause about the age their mother did (typically 51), and if your mother had a premature menopause, there's a one in ten chance that you will too, says gynaecologist Andrew Drakeley of Spire Liverpool and Liverpool Women's Hospital. He adds: "We also know that endometriosis and fibroids seem to run in families, but don't know why."

When it comes to pregnancy and childbirth, large babies also run in families, as do small ones. For example, women from Asian backgrounds use a different chart to other British women to measure baby growth, as their babies are smaller. But lifestyle matters too, as second-generation Asian women are eating a more Western diet during pregnancy and producing bigger babies, leading to a higher rate of instrumental deliveries as the babies are less easily naturally delivered. **w&h**

