

Key points for taking and drawing a genetic family history

Taking and drawing a genetic family history may involve asking for information on many members of a family, or may be targeted to detect a family pattern of a particular condition, according to the clinical question. The basic approach is the same – collecting information about relatives and their partnerships in one generation before moving up or down a generation.

This factsheet is a summary of our series on “Taking and drawing a family history” which offers more information and detailed explanations. The series includes, for example, factsheets on how to decide what and how much information is needed, the questions to ask and how to build up a detailed pedigree step by step. It is important to be sensitive when asking questions about illnesses and relationships in the family.

Key questions about family members

Although it may be best to take a systematic approach to enquiring about each branch of a family, sometimes this may not be possible in a busy clinic. There are some useful general questions, however, to gain a quick overview of medical conditions in a family. Answers to these questions may trigger a need for drawing out how the people with the condition are related to each other, to inform a preliminary assessment of whether there is an increased genetic risk which warrants further investigation or specialist referral.

Key questions

- “Do you have any concerns about diseases or conditions that seem to run on either your or your partner’s side of the family?”
- “Does anyone have a major medical, physical or mental problem?”
- “Has anyone ever needed treatment in hospital? Has anyone ever had any serious illnesses or operations? How old were they at diagnosis?” (Avoid just asking “Is everyone well?” as past medical history may not be offered!)
- “Have any adults, children or babies died? How old were they and what was the cause of death? Have there been any miscarriages or babies who were stillborn?”

Each specialty will also have key questions about symptoms and signs which would alert the clinician to the possibility that a genetic condition might be present in a family.

Tips for taking and recording a genetic family history

On the next page we outline the key steps in taking a genetic family history. In the family shown, the people giving the information are your patient and her husband. We have highlighted the different branches of their families and numbered them. Recording details of relatives in this order works well in practice: ask about partners, children, brothers, sisters and parents, moving across and then up/down the generations. This is set out overleaf.

Steps in taking and recording a genetic family tree - branch by branch

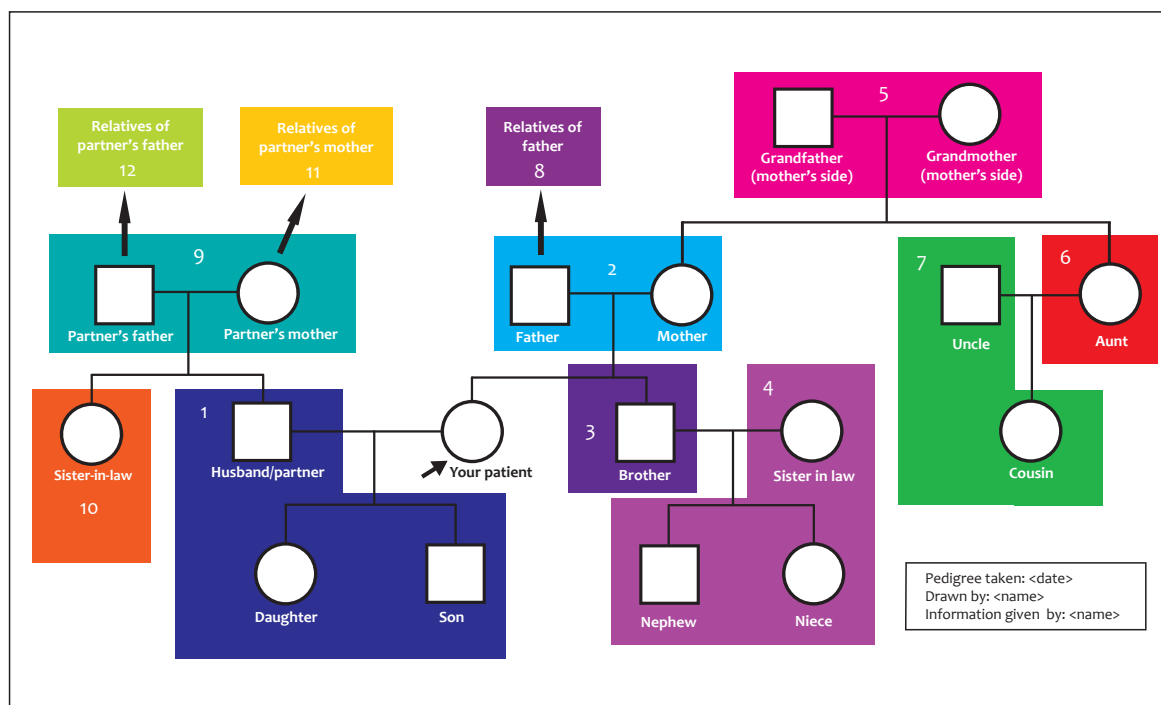


Fig. 1 How to record information about the family - branch by branch

- Ask about your informant and his or her partner(s) and their children (**Branch 1**):
“How many children have you had? Have you lost any children?”
“Are all your children with the same partner or were any with previous partners?”
 Be sensitive when trying to determine if partners are related by blood (a consanguineous relationship). Questions may include:
“Are you and your partner related (except by marriage)?” “Are there any surnames or maiden names in common in the family?” “Did any couples have the same surname before they were married to each other?”
- Record details about the parents of your informant (**Branch 2**).
- Next ask about each full brother and sister of the informant (**Branch 3**), his or her spouse(s) and their children (**Branch 4**). Remember to ask if any have died, or were lost during pregnancy.
- Ask whether either parent of your patient had children with other partners (the half-brothers and sisters of your patient), and draw in these relationships.
- Choose one of the parents (usually the mother) and record information on your patient’s maternal grandparents (**Branch 5**) and your parent’s full brother and sisters (**Branch 6**) and their spouses and children (**Branch 7**).
- Then ask the same questions about relatives of the other parent, usually the father (**Branch 8**).
- Now return to your informant’s partner and collect information about his/her relatives - parents first (**Branch 9**) and then full brothers and sisters (**Branch 10**).
- If you need information about the relatives of parents of the partner, choose one - usually the mother first (**Branch 11**) and ask about her parents and her brothers and sisters.
- Finally, ask about the relatives of the father of the partner (**Branch 12**).

At the end;

- Thank the informant, and ask *“Is there anything else you think I should know that I haven’t asked about?”*
- Date and write your name legibly on the pedigree. Add an explanation of any abbreviations.
- Ask for consent to share family history information with colleagues and/or other family members and note this.