

What is a genetic family history?

Information from a family tree can be important in making diagnoses and assisting clinical management. This series of factsheets focuses on the knowledge and skills required to take and record genetic family histories.

What is a genetic family history?

A genetic family history consists of information about

- the biological relationships between family members and
- any medical conditions they may have.

Although the information can be written as text, the family history is usually recorded as a family tree (pedigree) which allows a pictorial representation of family relationships and those family members affected by medical conditions.

The information is usually collected during a clinical consultation, and used to draw the family tree in the presence of the person giving the information (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Taking a family tree

There is international agreement that standardised pedigree symbols should be used, to ensure that health professionals throughout the world can share, understand and interpret family history information (Fig. 2). It is therefore useful for health professionals to be able to “read” a pedigree, even if their roles do not include taking family histories regularly.

There are other ways of collecting family history information; for instance, the patient or family may agree to complete a family history form. However, most health professionals find it easier to gain an overview through visual representation in a pedigree.

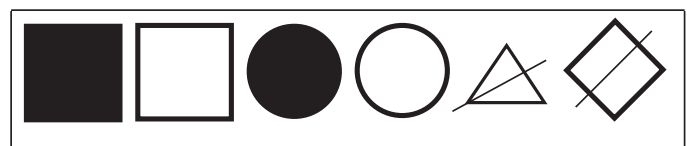


Fig. 2 Standardised pedigree symbols

Other factsheets in this series

This sheet is part two in the ‘Taking and Drawing a Family History Series’. All are based on clinical experience. They include:

- Why is taking a genetic family history important?
- What are the accepted symbols to use in drawing a pedigree?
- What and how much information should be included in a pedigree?
- Gathering information and drawing a genetic family tree.
- Pedigree drawing exercises.
- Safeguarding the information in a genetic family history.

Further support

The NHS National Genetics Education and Development Centre is developing materials to support health professionals whose roles include taking and recording family history information.

In addition to this toolkit, there are resources on:

- different modes of inheritance
- pedigree patterns associated with them
- clinical information about genetic conditions likely to be met in practice.

Video clips showing pedigrees being taken in practice will be available later in 2008. Resources are available free for non-commercial education purposes for healthcare staff on the Centre's website www.geneticseducation.nhs.uk