

Don't Catch What Your Parents Had

By Rosie Bank

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Do you ever wonder if you will catch what your parents had?

<Video #1: *Don't Catch What Your Parents Had* is [here](#).> [[Open in Acrobat for active links](#)]

If almost everyone in your family had diabetes or heart disease, do you think you will inherit that from your parents and grandparents?

Do you regard your future health as inevitable, as if you and your body are destined to play out the same scenario, to suffer the same fate as those who came before you?

If so, think again.

This article is about lifestyle, epigenetics, genetic expression, personal choices, and how you are more in control than you may have realized previously.

If you fear that you are headed to catch what your parents had, this information may be able to help you jump the track and vector yourself in another direction.

Where I am on my journey

Last week I received my lab results back from Kaiser. I chose to get a broader panel of blood work than ever before. The more I learn about nutrition, the more I realize how many moving parts there are that reveal our level of health and vitality, including challenges that may be lurking. Our blood holds key information about how well our pancreas is working, cancer markers, how well our immune system is working, how well we are absorbing nutrients from our food, levels of tissue inflammation, liver function, kidney function, cholesterol levels, how healthy our hearts are, and so many more indicators.

At age 66, and especially given my family history, I am thrilled to share that all my levels are normal. I told my husband that they should study me in a laboratory. In fact, compared with numbers from the last few years, my stats improved in a few key areas. I believe these fortuitous changes are the result of continually nudging myself toward healthier and cleaner eating, keeping my weight moderate, on-going meditation and exercise, and embracing a healthy lifestyle as an on-going pursuit.

For me, this “healthy lifestyle” is always work in progress, as I have not found an end point or run out of things to learn. Wherever you are on your journey, I hope you find comfort knowing that we are all the same insofar as we can continue to make better and more informed choices.

Two things about this:

- When my parents were my age (and younger) they had between them three bouts of cancer, one heart attack, two quadruple bi-pass surgeries, and eventually a stroke, debilitating nephropathy, kidney failure, and diabetes. The picture is just as grim of my grandparents who also had numerous episodes of heart disease and cancer.
- Back in my twenties and thirties I feared that I was destined to get the same ax that chopped down my parents' and grandparents' health. My eating habits were atrocious. I was a ticking stress bomb and misused food to manage all my emotions. Throw in a life-threatening eating disorder for good measure, and you have the picture.

In the past, knowing that I did not inherit great genes when it comes to my health felt like a burden. It no longer does, but the information about my family is useful to me. When you have a look around at the state of your parent's and grandparent's health, it should be eye-opening to see what befell family members who came before you. You can do this even if they are deceased. It's interesting to notice lifespan patterns, which diagnosis occurred at what ages, and lifestyle factors. Again, this is useful, but not necessarily a predictor of your own outcome.

Genetics: What about those who came before you?

<Video #2: Genetics is [here](#).>

Ask yourself if your living or deceased ancestors:

- smoked
- were obese
- drank to excess
- were sedentary
- were socially isolated
- struggled with massive amounts of stress
- had a low-quality diet void of whole foods and ate lots of processed ones
- and just as important, relied on their doctors to medicate what ailed them (without getting personally involved in taking care of themselves)

I recognize all these issues among my living and deceased relatives. Each one of these behaviors is correlated with one or more of the following: cancer, diabetes, stroke, cardiovascular disease, COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), diseases of the gut, cognitive impairment, just to name a few.

It is essential to realize that certain diseases are “inherited” when you follow your ancestors' lifestyle. According to [WebMD](#), diabetes, heart disease, Alzheimer's, and cancer can occur as a result of genetic factors *plus* environmental ones. According to Debra Shapiro, MD, founder of [A New View of Food](#), diet, lifestyle, plus exposure to toxins can determine which genes get expressed or suppressed. Our bodies can express tumor suppressor genes, or not, for example. This is why your genes are *not* your destiny. Furthermore, our lives, and choices effect generations to come.

Some diseases, such as Huntington's and cystic fibrosis, are less a result of lifestyle, and more the luck of the draw. If you have the gene for Huntington's, there is a 50/50 chance that the gene will express in your body. For our purposes here, let's focus on the conditions that are not predestined, and over which you have more control.

What do we inherit?

What looks like a family pattern of say, diabetes, can actually be generations within a family who have similar habits. These habits include:

- **Food choices and behaviors around food.** If most members of your family love to eat fast food, deep fried food, ghastly amounts of sugar, and processed meats, they will be more at risk to heart disease than you would be if you preferred a more wholesome diet. Making a new set of choices, namely different than those of the people who were part of your tribe, is literally breaking the chain that could have resulted in a health crisis for you. When you go in a different direction with your own food choices, you may have a different outcome.

From Dr. Michael Greger, author of *How Not to Die*,

"The primary reason diseases tend to run in families may be that diets tend to run in families."

- **Behaviors and beliefs around stress and emotions.** My mother's kitchen was a war zone. The negativity, stress, and criticism around food were imprinted on me as a young girl. I learned to misuse food, which is why I was so at risk and so sick. The diseases my parents had were barreling down the track toward me because of the poor habits I learned early on. Jumping that track remains among the most significant decisions I've ever made in my entire life.
- My father had many wonderful qualities. But sadly, he was prone to bottling his feelings, followed by explosive anger. He had two quadruple bypass surgeries when he was in his 50's. He was morbidly obese and died from the complications of a stroke. That kind of rage, coupled with abusing food was invariably correlated with my dad's heart disease. Imagine how much unlearning and relearning was required by me to write my own script around food, emotions, and heart health.

One of my clients recently revealed something she discovered in reviewing *her* family of origin and how they dealt with so-called unpleasant emotions such as sadness and anger. (I call these "so-called" because we can [learn from all of our emotions](#).)

It was typical for her dad to offer to get ice cream in response to seeing his daughter be angry or upset. She is now working to dismantle the angry-equals-food link. It is not in her DNA any more than her diabetes is. What is important for you to get from this is how she – and perhaps you if you can relate to this – has finally been able to uncouple emotions and food. Diabetes showed up in her family of origin and for her. She is now veered in a new direction and has taken back control.

In a similar way, another client uses anti-depressants to manage anxiety. Her sister, mother, and grandmother did the same thing. What she learned was the medical impact of anxiety and thus, something to medicate. She revealed that she learned to worry from her mother, who learned it from *her* mother. This is a good example of how depression may not be something we inherit, but the result of learned, also called *modeled*, behavior.

There is a PS to this story. This same woman has learned to meditate and use a variety of breathing techniques to sooth her stressed state to increase a sense of harmony. She continually works on her diet and her relationship with food. What seemed like something she inherited and was therefore stuck with evolved into an opportunity for her to take more responsibility for her health and well-being.

- **Who is in charge?** My kids joke that when they were little, I would tell them to “walk it off” even if they were having appendicitis. Of course, this is an exaggeration, and thankfully they never had appendicitis, but the point is I was not the kind of mom to rush my kids to the doctor for a little sniffle. My own mother has a very different belief about doctors than I do. She has urged me to go to the doctor numerous times when, for me, it seemed like my body would figure out how to regain balance and health. Thankfully, my body always did.

(By the way, and as an aside, there were three exceptions for me, in the form of oprthopedic surgeries to repair sport-related injuries. The fact that I took great care of my body *before* I was injured made a world of difference in my ability to bounce back completely and rapidly from those operations.)

When I was a chubby kid, my parents took me to a doctor to prescribe a diet for me. It was torture, embarrassing, and a million miles away from a wholesome environment in which I eventually learned how to eat well.

The point is that among families, there are beliefs and attitudes regarding the amount of control we have in the area of health, versus the degree to which we hand the keys over and leave the driving to our doctors.

In the early 2000’s, a friend of mine was suffering from devastating symptoms associated with Hodgkin’s lymphoma. This wealthy entrepreneur/inventor had an atrocious diet. He ate mostly iceberg lettuce and cooked chicken, and drank only coke. I was deeply involved in my nutrition training at the time and wondered if he wanted to learn about some of the benefits of supplements and diet.

I never thought about curing his cancer. Rather, I was learning about helping our bodies get healthier, and how this can impact some of our greatest challenges. My friend’s response, which I remember like it was yesterday, went like this, “*If I can’t trust my oncologists at Stanford, who can I trust?*” These words rang in my ears while I was attending his funeral less than one year later.

Here is one last example. Recently a friend asked me if I had checked with my doctor to make sure that I was getting everything I needed on a plant-based diet. I know that there

are plenty of exceptions, but in general, most physicians receive an average of nineteen hours of nutritional training [while in medical school](#). Given that I have been training consistently for twenty years, it did not occur to me to ask my doctor if it was okay to be a practicing vegan. (I met a physician at a family wedding last weekend who told me that she had a total of ninety minutes of nutrition training in six years of medical school.)

To add real impact to this true story: I bumped into my doctor in the grocery line at a local market. Suffice to say that what was in her cart did not indicate to me that she was conscious of or cared about the link between what we eat and our health.

William Osler said,

“The good physician treats the disease; the great physician treats the person who has the disease.”

My dad was morbidly obese. None of his doctors made an issue out of how he was feeding his body and misusing food.

Who do you think oversees your body and your health?

Epigenetics

<Video #3: Epigenetics is [here](#).>

Your DNA carries information that may inform your potential to inherit various traits related to health and disease. For example, if your parents' DNA contained code that tagged the chromosomes to express cancer, your parents could get cancer especially if their behavior (food, exercise, lifestyle, etc.) triggered the expression lying latent in their DNA. Their habits can switch this genetic expression on or off.

What about you? The same information may be in your DNA sequence, and just like your parents, you can switch this expression on or off by your diet and lifestyle.

One reason why this is important for you to know is in case you have drawn the erroneous conclusion that you are destined to get the diseases that ran in your family. This simply may not be the case.

There never is a rationale for trashing our bodies or neglecting our health. Now that you know that your ancestors might have left behind clues that point to potential risks in your health profile, it is even more important to eat wholesome food, exercise regularly, keep a moderate weight, not smoke, drink only moderately, get plenty of rest, and enjoy meaningful social contacts. If you were to ignore any of these categories, and if heart disease ran through your family like a wildfire, you might just be playing with matches yourself. You can think of this as risk factors.

The inverse to this is useful to observe as well. If you got the jackpot of healthy genes, this does not mean that you will *automatically* live until age 98 playing bridge and square dancing like several of your ancestors. If you made the error to leave your health to your lucky genes, you would be tempting fate. Even if you have a genetic advantage, any lifestyle habits that potentially put you at risk can expose possible exposure for disease. These may be linked to an outcome you do not desire.

We are all going to die

<Video #4: *We Are All Going To Die* is [here](#).>

There is no such thing as someone who “never gets sick.” There are some really interesting articles online questioning whether or not some people never even catch a cold. Most of the articles agree that some people do seem more immune than others. Lifestyle – in particular each of the items I mentioned above – plays a crucial role in what appears to be some super immunity from colds, flues and other more serious ailments. And yet, based on [what I read](#), there is no final definition that can point to exceptional health, in particular a situation where good health and longevity are guaranteed.

I loved learning about outliers from Malcolm Gladwell, in his book by the same name. Just because you come from a family of super-fit-and-healthy ninety-somethings, it still would not be prudent to throw caution to the wind. Outliers live outside of the graph. If all the people in the world who followed a plant-based diet tended toward greater health and longevity, still, this does not mean that this is a guarantee. My point is to encourage you *not* to tempt fate.

In a similar manner, there are exceptions in the other direction. Julie Child, the author and chef who introduced America to French cooking was quoted saying, “*With enough butter, anything is good.*” And yet she and her husband, Paul Cushing Child, lived to ages 91 and 94 respectively. I learned this while getting my certification in Plant Based Nutrition at The Center for Nutrition at e-Cornell. The lecturers were cautioning the students to regard a diet high in saturated fat, including butter of course, as the number one thing to avoid in order to have a heart that keeps on ticking well into old age. Julia Child and her husband were outliers.

By adjusting our expectations and accepting responsibility for our bodies, we can *develop* a healthier body in the same way that we develop our ability to play a musical instrument. Our health can get rusty, in the same way that our musical talents can diminish if we neglect to practice.

It's not just one thing

I like to think about wellness and vitality as the sum of a variety of ways that we take care of ourselves. Staying healthy is not a fixed moment in time. Rather, this is a dynamic state, it's flexible, and something we address throughout our days, over many days. It's not like we become well and stay well automatically. Enjoying radiant good health is a vigorous process.

For me, it was a conscious choice to jump the track and get out of the way of the train called *death by lifestyle induced disease* that was barreling toward me. I do not want to take chances. I know I will die someday. We all will. It is worth setting the intention, and then adjusting our practices, to increase the chances that ours will be a blessed long life. Nix on living short and dying long. That's not a great deal or a scenario to look forward to. What is a good deal is attempting to avoid self-induced risks, that are avoidable, and that could have ill effects.

I love this quote by Dr. Kim Williams, past president of the American College of Cardiology.

"I don't mind dying; I just don't want it to be my own fault."

Like Dr. Williams, I practice and recommend that illness and death come not as the result of self-inflicted poor lifestyle choices.

Personally, I feel that taking responsibility for my health has been a smart way to live my life. I feel the rewards every day and encourage you to do the same. There is no better way to live than being active and well-nourished. My hope for you is that you discover this for yourself. Getting to the point where this is the only way to live makes you the best kind of outlier there is.