

ALL IN THE FAMILY?

Your Medical History

by Katie Sharp

Marla, a junior, was worried. Lately she was always thirsty and always going to the bathroom. Her weight had dropped a bit, even though she was eating as she always did. Plus, she was always hungry. Marla told her mom what was happening. Good thing she did.

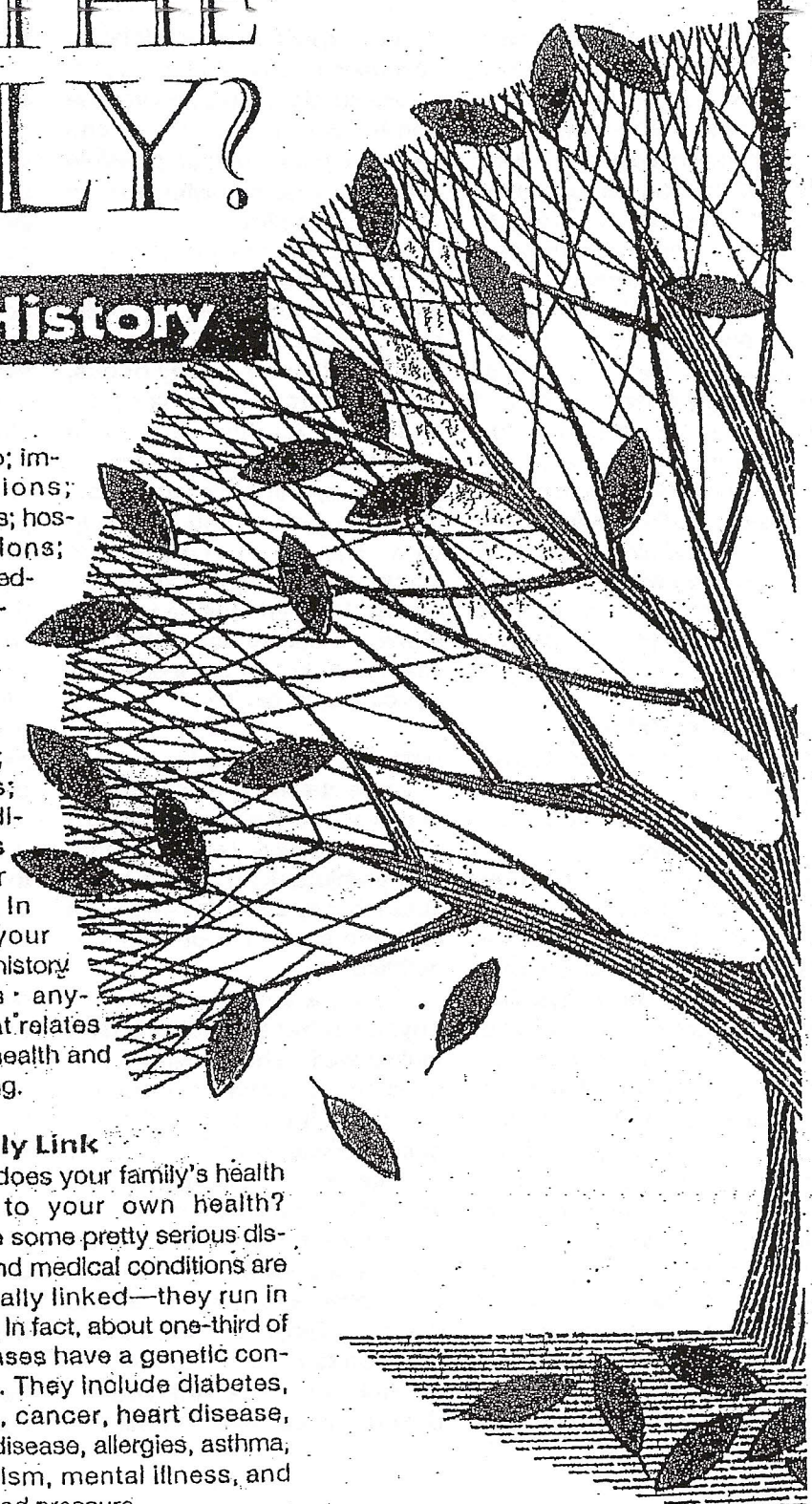
As it turns out, Marla's grandmother and uncle both have diabetes, a disease in which the body cannot properly use sugar. Marla's mom knew that the disease ran in their family. She recognized the early symptoms and quickly made a doctor's appointment for Marla. Marla was diagnosed with diabetes. Her doctor and the doctor's diabetes information team taught her how to lead a normal, active life while taking care of the disease.

Luckily for Marla, her mother had kept a medical history of their family, including one for Marla. A medical history is a collection of information concerning your health. In addition to diseases that run in your family, medical histories also include your own past illnesses; lifestyle habits, such as diet, exercise, medicines, stress,

and sleep; immunizations; operations; hospitalizations; current medications—over-the-counter and prescription; allergies; and medical tests and their results. In effect, your medical history includes anything that relates to your health and well-being.

A Family Link

Why does your family's health matter to your own health? Because some pretty serious diseases and medical conditions are genetically linked—they run in families. In fact, about one-third of all diseases have a genetic connection. They include diabetes, obesity, cancer, heart disease, kidney disease, allergies, asthma, alcoholism, mental illness, and high blood pressure.



YOUR MEDICAL HISTORY HELPS THE PHYSICIAN IN DIAGNOSING PROBLEMS, DECIDING ON TREATMENTS, AND PROVIDING FOLLOW-UP CARE.

When you know someone in your family has had a certain disease, you have the upper hand. You know that you may have a better chance of someday having the condition than someone who does not have it in the family. So you can take steps to help prevent it, or, as in Marla's case, detect and treat it early. For instance, if you are aware that three of your grandparents died of heart disease at a fairly early age, you can take steps to help prevent heart disease from affecting you. You can watch your weight, exercise, eat a healthful diet low in fat and cholesterol, and alert your physician to your increased risk. He or she can advise you on other steps that might help you avoid heart disease.

Share Your History

Knowing your medical history is important, but it's not enough. You must share what you know with your physician.

John, a sophomore, learned he was allergic to penicillin—a drug used to treat many illnesses—when he was very young. But later, when he visited a new physician, he failed to inform the physician of his allergy—even when the physician asked. John simply forgot.

A couple of months later when John was in the hospital for an emergency appendix operation, his physician gave him penicillin. John had a severe reaction. Luckily, the physician figured out the cause and took steps to treat the problem. John learned the hard way how important it is to communicate with his physician.

As John's story shows, you

cannot expect your physician to be a mind reader. You must provide accurate, thorough information to your doctor. He or she must know as much as possible about your medical history to treat you most effectively.

That is why most physicians, when first seeing a new patient, ask a lot of questions. Typically, the questions center around family medical history, daily habits, existing allergies, past illnesses, and so on. All this information helps the physician in diagnosing problems, deciding on treatments, and providing follow-up care. The information is also invaluable in case of an emergency. If you are unable to communicate certain facts that will affect your care, your medical history can save your life.

Getting Personal

Some questions your physician may ask could seem to be your own private business. No matter how embarrassing or personal a question may seem, it's important that you answer it openly and truthfully.

Tanya, a senior, visited her physician because she wasn't feeling well. While asking questions about Tanya's symptoms, her physician asked if she had been drinking alcohol. Afraid her parents would find out if she told the truth, Tanya answered no.

As a result of Tanya's fear, Tanya's physician didn't have the whole picture. She wasn't able to diagnose Tanya's condition as a reaction to a dangerous mix of alcohol and an over-the-counter drug Tanya had taken. Luckily, the

reaction cleared on its own. Next time, however, Tanya may not be so lucky.

It's important to realize that while some questions your physician asks may seem personal, he or she is not trying to pry into your private life. Nor is he or she trying to get you in trouble with your parents. Your physician simply wants to provide you with the best possible care. There is no need to be afraid to answer any question. What is said between patient and doctor is kept confidential—unless there is a threat of violence or abuse.

Answering your physician's questions may not always be easy. A little research may be necessary. You may have to check which immunizations you have had, ask your parents if you've had a certain illness or surgery, or ask a relative about conditions that aunts, uncles, cousins, or grandparents may have had. In your search for answers, you will probably come across some pretty interesting information about your family's history. Just add that to the benefits of knowing your medical history. □

