

Change your risk for disease

How often have you heard the expression, "I can't help it, it's in my genes"? While this might be a convenient explanation for being overweight or having high blood pressure or elevated cholesterol, a hereditary tendency for these and other health problems doesn't mean the situation is hopeless.

Adopting a healthful lifestyle can offset your genetic risk for disease, even if you already have the disease or if the disease runs in your family. In fact, people with a personal or family history of a chronic disease such as cancer, heart disease or diabetes have the most to gain from making lifestyle changes.

It is true that your genetic make-up can put you at risk of developing some diseases, but this risk depends on a combination of genes, the environment and lifestyle choices. For instance, if you carry a gene that increases your risk for heart disease or cancer, then what you eat, whether you smoke and how much you exercise will play a role in whether you actually develop the disease.

Another important step you can take to reduce your risk is to schedule regular checkups, discuss your family medical history with your doctor and follow recommended screening guidelines developed for people with a higher risk for disease based on family medical history.

You can't change your genes, but you can reduce your risk for disease by working closely with your doctor and making wise lifestyle choices.