

## DNA Testing to Search for Relatives

In recent years, there has been an explosion in the use of DNA testing. There are three reasons people do a DNA test - one is a legal DNA test which involves two individuals being tested for proof of a relationship, commonly used to prove paternity. This test is carried out by specialist companies and the results are accepted as legal evidence of a relationship. Another form of testing is genetic health testing which is used to establish if a person carries genes that involve health risks such as genetic disorders, cancer or heart disease. The third type of test, which this article focusses on is genealogical DNA testing - a relatively new technology where customers send their sample (saliva or cheek swab) to one of the testing companies to have their DNA extracted and analysed. This analysis can provide an estimate of ethnicity and be uploaded to a database and compared with other users, generating DNA matches. These matches can assist a person to establish their ancestry and/or to find relatives. There are now millions of people across the world using genealogical DNA tests, known as Direct To Consumer (DTC) tests.

There are some important points about DNA testing worth bearing in mind:

- ◆ DNA testing is potentially useful for people searching for their parent(s) and previous generations because it traces up the line of ancestors, it is less useful for a person searching for their descendants unless that descendant has taken a DNA test with the same company.
- ◆ A person can be found through DNA testing even if they have not tested themselves because it is possible to identify and research familial connections through the DNA matches of other family members, particularly if those matches have a family tree they are willing to share.



- ◆ When DNA matches show up in your results it means that you also show up as a match in their results, unless you change your settings to avoid being visible.
- ◆ It is possible to send messages to matches through the testing sites to ask them questions about their family in a bid to work out how they are related.
- ◆ **Interpreting the results of a DNA test requires skill and understanding of how the matches work and how to use the various tools available.** It can be complex and time consuming and it is common for people who are not across this technology to need expert advice.
- ◆ DNA testing is less likely to generate matches for intercountry adoptees because testing is not popular or affordable in their countries of origin. There are some DNA companies which are building country-specific databases which have had some success.

### Benefits of DNA Testing

The uptake of DTC testing has grown so rapidly because it has revolutionised genealogical searching, with users combining their DNA results with traditional genealogical research and documentary evidence to infer relationships and find long lost relatives. It is relatively affordable and has been widely promoted by the testing companies and the media.

Many adopted people, donor conceived people and former wards of state welcome this new technology. It has an obvious appeal for people who do not know the identity of one or both of their parents, including people who are not aware they are entitled to apply for their records or whose records are not available to them, have been lost or destroyed, are incomplete or have been falsified. It is also being used by people who are searching for relatives not identified in their records, most commonly fathers and siblings.

Furthermore, DNA testing is seen as reliable. The potential to find out the truth about identity and family is the biggest benefit of DNA testing and can be life changing when successful.

## Risks of DNA Testing

Like any new technology, DTC testing comes with unknown risks. It is as yet an unregulated industry and the testing companies are based outside Australia so not necessarily subject to our laws. One of the most commonly cited risks is the potential misuse of data by the testing companies for example selling DNA data to interested parties without consent. There are conflicting views about who owns your DNA once you have tested - testing companies state that you always own your DNA while some commentators say that given this has not been tested in a court in Australia it is impossible to know with any certainty. Other risks include the testing companies going bust, being sold, or being hacked.

Legal and privacy risks might not only apply to those who take a test, but also to the people who share their DNA i.e. their relatives. The best way to manage these risks is to understand them and to carefully read the terms and conditions and set your permissions accordingly.

There are also social and emotional risks, some of which can be reduced by being informed and supported. One important issue is that while with records searches the searcher usually makes contact directly with the person sought. DNA testing puts the searcher in contact with anyone with shared DNA, who might be a close or distant relative. Depending on who is contacted, how they are contacted and what they do with the information, their involvement can be problematic for both the searcher and the person sought and so disrupt the potential for contact or reunion. This factor can make DTC testing precarious for the searcher because it puts their information into the hands of unknown family members who might not handle this news with sensitivity. They might be over-zealous in their attempts to help, or they might seek to block the searcher from finding out more. This type of contact with other relatives can also put the person being sought in a precarious position depending on their situation and their relationship with the person contacted.

Another aspect to bear in mind is that just like accessing adoption records, DNA testing can sometimes reveal upsetting information. The difference is that with DNA testing the searcher

might not receive that information in the most appropriate way or be supported in dealing with what they find.

## Preparation is Key

Most organisations supporting people with family tracing will tell you that preparation is key. This can include talking through possible scenarios with a trusted support person, reading articles or watching videos by people who have been through search and contact, or participating in support groups either online or in person. If you have considered the various possible outcomes and how you might respond, you are better placed to make decisions along the way. This is important when undertaking a DNA test because unlike traditional searches which involve taking one step at a time at your own pace, with DNA testing, once your results are uploaded there is the potential for immediate connections.

## Questions to Ask Before Testing

Below are some useful questions to consider before testing, or even if you have already done your test.

*Q What are you hoping to achieve out of taking a DNA test?*

*Q Have you applied for all the records you are eligible to apply for i.e. records of adoption, 'out of home care', or donor conception?*

*Q Are you aware of some of the possible outcomes and have you thought through how you might respond in these situations?*

*Q Do you have a trusted support person who will listen and provide information without trying to influence your decisions?*

*Q Do you know where to go for professional support if you need it?*

*Q Have you read the terms, conditions and privacy settings and decided what you are willing to give permission for?*

*Q How will you respond to unexpected contact from a relative?*

*Q Are you prepared to put the time and effort into learning how to interpret your results, or do you have access to someone who can assist with this?*

## Interpreting Results

Once you have received your DNA results:

- ♦ Your results are matched with results of relatives who have also had their DNA tested with that

same company and your estimated relationship is provided. Initially you might have no close relatives, however, over time you may find more matches are generated.

- ◆ In order to access family trees and/or ethnicity of your DNA matches, some testing companies require you to pay a subscription fee.
- ◆ DNA results alone do not always provide immediate answers: communication with your DNA matches, access to their family trees plus use of historic genealogical records and other clues such as shared locations and timeframes will help determine a relationship.
- ◆ A person's ethnicity is determined by taking their DNA result and comparing it to other DNA samples. People who test with more than one company often get different results. As more people test, ethnicity results change. Generally, ethnicity results are not considered especially reliable and are indicative only.
- ◆ Some testing companies allow users to upload their autosomal DNA results from other companies in order to compare matches.

Interpreting DNA test results may require assistance from someone with specialist expertise. Some testing companies provide this service for a fee. Some post-adoption support organisations have expertise within their search team. There are also volunteer 'search angels' who can provide technical assistance. Whoever you ask to provide you with technical support will require access to your results so it is important to be discerning when deciding who to ask. You might like to ask them about their expertise, success rates, how they operate and whether they adhere to the codes of conduct, guidelines and standards for genetic genealogists (see link below). It is also important to agree with them up front about their role in your search to ensure that they do not correspond with your matches without your permission and involvement.

The [International Society of Genetic Genealogy Wiki](#) states that "*ISOGG highly recommends that adoptees, orphans, donor conceived individuals and others with sensitive matters work with experienced search organizations prior to making contact with biological families.*" If you find a DNA match which shows a close relationship, for example half sibling, aunt/uncle or first cousin you would like to make contact with, VANISH support staff are available to discuss issues of concern and how to make outreach.

If you are interested in knowing more about DNA testing there are many books, articles and sources of information available. There are also plenty of media stories about people who have found their relatives and what they experienced. We provide a few links and references for further reading on the following page. If you are not sure whether you have accessed all the records that might be available to you then please contact VANISH to discuss this further.

## Useful DNA Links and References

Which test to do <https://www.genie1.com.au/blog/58-which-dna-testing-company>  
Or <https://thednageek.com/the-pros-and-cons-of-the-main-dna-testing-companies-2018-version/>  
The DNA Detectives <https://thednadetectives.com/about-the-company/>  
DNA Adoption <http://dnaadoption.org/>  
DNA Testing Adviser <https://www.dna-testing-adviser.com/Tracing-Birth-Parents.html>

## Media stories

<https://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/health-and-wellness/dna-detectives-and-the-end-of-family-secrets-20190306-p5124t.html>

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/discovering-my-half-sister-through-dna/10547774>

<https://thewest.com.au/lifestyle/west-weekend-magazine/heart-of-the-matter-ng-b881054723z>  
<https://cbs4indy.com/2019/04/08/bloomington-woman-reunites-with-birth-parents-in-south-korea-after-50-years/>

More stories can be found at <https://www.genie1.com.au/blog/80-dna-success-stories>



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