

Things to Consider before Taking a DNA Test or Asking Someone Else to do so

Michelle Patient

Ethical & Privacy Considerations

Just as traditional research methods can reveal previously hidden family secrets, it is also true that DNA testing can reveal unknown, and to some, unwanted information. It is important to be sensitive to others' concerns when asking them to take a test to further your research. Unknown aunts, uncles, cousins and even siblings may appear, so those who test need to be prepared for the unexpected.

While the major companies are very mindful of privacy considerations for those using their services, it is important to be aware of possible privacy concerns you or your relatives may have. Particularly when exporting the "raw" DNA test result file (ie: the text file not a personal sample) to third party tool sites.

Who and where to test?

Most genealogy questions will be answered by an *autosomal* DNA (at-DNA) test. Currently there are four main companies widely recommended for at-DNA testing for family history purposes: 23andMe, AncestryDNA, FTDNA and MyHeritage.

Results are available online and are not posted out to testers via traditional postal services. Internet access is required to receive, view and analyse your results. Whichever company you test with you will be connected to everyone else who have their results there. As at April 2022, each company continues to give you access for the initial cost of the test. (23andMe shows you the top 1,500 matches at no further cost.) New matches will appear in your match list as more people test with them. You could say "it is the gift that keeps on giving". When I first tested back in 2015, I had 36 4th cousins and closer matches at AncestryDNA, at the time of writing I have 497.

Allow time to learn about this new genealogy record, plan it into your calendar. Unlike other records you have previously used, it has an initially steep learning curve as you have no foundation knowledge stored in your memory to draw on. Initially, I suggest you only use the website you tested at until you feel comfortable with working with your matches and have worked out a way to work with your results that suits you. Make time to read as much as you can in books, blogs and Facebook® groups. Watch the many educational videos available free on YouTube®.

Currently the best testing plan for most of those starting out is to test at AncestryDNA, as by far it has the largest pool of atDNA customers and not only tree hosting but tree building tools (both are free services). It is best to test biological family in the generations above you (if they are alive and agree) as they carry more of your ancestors' at-DNA than you do. So, if you are fortunate to have parents, or grandparents, or their siblings, alive they would be the

best people to test first. My mother and I both tested back in 2015 and I could easily see which side my matches belonged to as a result. Hopefully many of you will have older generations to test. Of course, some of us just want to test ourselves out of curiosity, go for it, but do think about testing those in generations above you while you can.

Where to from here?

As this is a new tool one thing we can all expect is change. Scientists only fully identified the chemistry of the human genome this century, then they started to explore its application in areas such as health and evolution. Using it for family history became widely commercially available in 2015. Since then many trees have been confirmed, some branches pruned and new branches grown. DNA evidence certainly has become the fourth vital record for family historians.