# Using DNA to search for family separated by adoption

A mini-guide for people searching for family separated by adoption

**Last Updated:** 31 May 2025

VANISH

# Introduction

Many people affected by adoption and family separation choose to use direct-to-consumer DNA testing to find their relatives. These testing platforms have grown in popularity in recent years. This mini-guide is designed to help understand the opportunities and potential challenges of using DNA testing in conducting a search.

# Before using DNA testing

- For adopted individuals beginning a search for family, it is recommended to: First obtain adoption records, as these may contain valuable information about the person being sought.
- Check the Adoption Information Register at Adoption Information Services (AIS), To see if contact details have already been provided by the person being sought.
- Use traditional search techniques to locate natural family members).

# Why use DNA testing?

DNA testing has become a popular tool for genealogists. For adoptees, donor-conceived people, and people with unknown parentage, it is sometimes the only way to identify natural relatives, such as a natural parent if they are not named in records, or when traditional search methods have not been successful in locating the person being sought.

# Types of DNA tests

There are several types of Direct-to-Consumer DNA tests available, but the most common is autosomal DNA testing, which is offered by all the major DNA testing companies.

For a comparison of what the major DNA testing companies offer, visit https://genie1.au/which-dna-testing-company-should-i-use/

# Which DNA testing company to use

While VANISH cannot advocate for one company over another, there are advantages to using the most popular DNA testing companies, AncestryDNA and My Heritage, based on the numbers of people who have already tested with these companies. Therefore, matches are more likely to be found on these sites.

# Other things to consider while choosing a company to use:

- Costs – not just cost of doing the test, but also the cost of subscribing for access to their databases and DNA analysis tools. There might be limited access to the database

unless you pay additional amounts. Does the company have a database of records, indexes, and/or family trees useful for searching?

- Does it offer the ability to download and/or upload DNA results to or from that company to another database? For example, results can be downloaded from AncestryDNA and upload onto My Heritage, but they cannot be done the other way.
- Read the company's terms and conditions and make sure there is understanding around how they store the DNA sample, how they manage privacy, and so on.

## Other considerations

Many people have concerns about the privacy of their DNA test. It is important to note that an anonymous name can be used for a DNA test if there are concerns about name visibility to others.

Another important consideration is the level of preparedness for unexpected results. Some discoveries about unknown family members can be confronting, so it is important to approach the process with readiness for receiving new and potentially challenging information.

## How does it work?

You will need to order a DNA test online and set up an account. This account is free until a subscription is required to access search tools or records. A testing kit is provided, along with instructions for collecting a DNA sample. The company will supply a reply-paid mail pouch. Once received, the DNA company extracts the DNA, and uploads the results to its database, where they are compared to the DNA of all their other test-takers.

An email is sent to with instructions to access your results, which are viewable on their website.

## Your results

A list of individuals who share DNA will be provided (referred to as matches), with those sharing the highest amount of DNA appearing at the top. The list includes usernames, the amount of shared DNA expressed as a percentage or in centimorgans (cM), which is the unit of measurement for DNA, and whether a family tree is available. There will also be an indication of the likely range of relationships the amount of shared DNA may represent, such as "2$^{nd}$ to 3$^{rd}$ cousin". This is a guide only.

Ideally, a close family member will also have tested with the same company. Some people may actually find a parent or sibling has tested, or perhaps a first cousin. Such scenarios can provide much quicker answers. However, to be realistic, this is not frequently the case. Many people who do their DNA testing find matches that are second cousins or beyond.

## Interpreting results

Close relatives can still be found even if the person in question has not done a DNA test themselves. It will be more challenging, and the chances of being able to identify that person will be influenced by a number of considerations, such as having a reasonable number of matches closer than 4$^{th}$ cousins, and how many matches have large enough family trees to be

useful. Not everyone who has done a DNA test has a publicly viewable family tree. Many people are given DNA tests as gifts and have little or no interest in the results beyond finding out about their ethnicity background.

Using traditional genealogical searching combined with DNA research and analysis tools, a parent may be able to be identified. Many of the DNA companies have helpful tools, though usually at the cost of a subscription.

It is necessary to develop the skills required to determine how both the searcher and the person being sought may fit into the family trees of identified DNA matches.. It can be complex and time consuming and may require more than a beginner's skill in genealogical research.

Be mindful that family trees on the testing company's database may not always be accurate. Dates, names, places and relationships should be checked against other sources, such as birth, death and marriage indexes or certificates, and so on.

There are many websites, books and videos that will teach you about the basics of DNA, as well as the techniques required to successfully find family. There are also online groups (such as on Facebook or adoption websites) and family history societies where help can be sought and organisations that provide more structured training.

# Reaching out to DNA matches

It is possible to send messages to your DNA Matches through the testing company. Note that not everyone checks their messages regularly, so it is possible they will not respond for a long time, if at all.

If searching for a particular person (such as a natural mother or father), take time to consider the relationship of the DNA Match to the person sought. Perhaps they are a cousin, making them a nephew or niece of a natural parent. If it is revealed that the individual is adopted the DNA Match will gain private information about the natural parent that the parent may prefer to keep confidential .

In other words, it is important to consider carefully what information is shared with DNA Matches, and what questions are asked. Maintaining discretion and respecting the privacy of natural parents is essential.

# Additional Resources

## Guides for Beginners:

- Genie1 & Genetic Genealogy - https://genie1.au/
- International Society of Genetic Genealogy (ISOGG) Wiki - https://isogg.org/wiki/Wiki_Welcome_Page

## ISOGG Beginner's Guide to Genetic Genealogy -
https://isogg.org/wiki/Beginners'_guides_to_genetic_genealogy

## DNA testing & Adoption

- International Society of Genetic Genealogy Wiki - DNA Testing for Adoptees: https://isogg.org/wiki/DNA_testing_for_adoptees
- DNA Adoption.com - https://dnaadoption.org/
- Australian DNA Hub – DNA Genealogy for Adoptees - https://www.australiandnahub.org.au/services

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This resource has been developed by VANISH with the support of the Victorian Government Department of Justice and Community Safety as a guide for people undertaking their own search for family separated by adoption.

By registering with VANISH as you commence your search, VANISH search and support staff can assist you with practical suggestions and reading material. They can also connect you to professional and peer support options during and after the search process.

To contact VANISH visit www.vanish.org.au or phone 1300 VANISH (826 474).

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