

7 Tips to Find Your Birth Family



1 LOOK FOR PAPER RECORDS FIRST. Scour records and letters in your adoptive family's home for mentions of when or where you were born and adopted. Consult adoption agencies and registries to see what information they may have about your biological parents. Learn state laws governing adoptees' access to birth records, and request any available birth information from the state. This may give you the name of your birth parents. Finally, register your search on Adopted.com <www.adopted.com>. (Your state may have its own registry.)

2 TEST YOUR DNA. Genetic genealogy has opened up new possibilities for those of unknown parentage. Autosomal DNA tests can show you basic information about your ethnic origins, and other test takers with whom you share an ancestor (your "DNA matches"). If you find a relatively close match, such as second cousins or closer, consult that person's family tree (or contact him or her directly) to identify your potential shared ancestors. Then research the couple's descendants for people in the right place and time to be your parents.

3 UNDERSTAND THE BASICS OF DNA. Study the biology behind DNA testing for a realistic understanding of what genetic tests can tell you about your birth family. Knowing DNA inheritance patterns also will help you determine how you're related to genetic matches.

4 UPLOAD YOUR DNA TO MULTIPLE TESTING COMPANIES. By putting your DNA data in multiple databases, you're opening yourself up to more possible matches. You might test with Ancestry DNA <www.ancestry.com/dna> and/or 23andMe <www.23andme.com>, then upload your results to

MyHeritage DNA <www.myheritage.com/dna>, Family Tree DNA <www.familytreedna.com> and Living DNA <www.livingdna.com>. Third-party services like GEDmatch <www.gedmatch.com> let you compare your results with those who've uploaded from other sites, and offer additional analysis tools.

5 SEARCH ONLINE FAMILY TREES. Thanks to sites like Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com>, more and more genealogists are uploading their genealogy information into online family trees. Compare others' trees against your own birth family research. Online trees aren't independently verified, so you should always fact-check them and look for sources—but they can still provide useful clues.

6 CREATE A STRATEGY FOR CONTACTING POTENTIAL RELATIVES. Adoption research can reveal affairs, sexual assault and other unexpected, disturbing or even traumatic events. Before contacting a potential birth relative, take care to prepare yourself for reactions ranging from joy to denial to hostility. Then reach out with a general question, such as "It looks like we match at a second-cousin level. I don't know much about my great-grandparents. What are your great-grandparents' names?" As you and the match become more comfortable, disclose more details about your search.

7 RECORD YOUR MATCH'S FAMILY TREE BEFORE MAKING CONTACT. Experienced adoption researchers advise taking screenshots of a key DNA match's profile, family tree and any shared matches before contacting that person. If the match isn't interested in aiding your research, he or she may remove information from the site or block you from seeing it.

HOW ARE YOU RELATED TO DNA MATCHES?

Autosomal DNA testing companies look at the amount of DNA you and a match share, measured in centimorgans (cM), to give you an estimate of your relationship. This chart expands on those estimates to help you more closely determine how you and a match are related.

Your DNA testing service provides the amount of shared cM between you and a match. In the "Average Percentage" column below, find the number nearest to your shared cM. The Relationship column shows the likely relationship(s). Other relationships are possible, though, as shown in the "Range" column. For example, if you share 900 cM with someone, possible relationships include first cousins, half-aunt/uncle and half-niece/nephew, great-grandparent/great-grandchild, and great-aunt/uncle and great-niece/nephew.

The closer the relationship, the more useful the match will be in your genealogy search. For example, second cousins share great-grandparents. If you have a second-cousin match, find the person's great-grandparents in his family tree. Then research that couple's descendants—one of them may be your birth parent.

A given relationship, such as first cousins, can share varying amounts of DNA because of the recombination, or "shuffling," that occurs at conception. You usually share about 850 cM with a first cousin, but that number could be as low as 396 or as high as 1,397 cM.

Average shared cM*	Average percentage of shared DNA**	Relationship	Range of shared cM***
3,400	50%	Parent/child	2,376–3,720
2,600	50%	Full sibling	1,613–3,488
1,700	25%	Half sibling	1,160–2,436
		Aunt/uncle/niece/nephew	1,201–2,282
		Double first cousin	2,209–3,384
		Grandparent/grandchild	984–2,462
850	12.5%	First cousin	396–1,397
		Half-aunt/half-uncle/half-niece/half-nephew	492–1,315
		Great-grandparent/great-grandchild	485–1,486
		Great-aunt/great-uncle/great-niece/great-nephew	330–1,467
425	6.25%	First cousin once removed	102–980
		Half-first cousin	156–979
		Half-great-aunt/half-great-uncle/half-great-niece/half-great-nephew	184–668
212.5	3.125%	Second cousin	41–592
		First cousin twice removed	33–71
		Half-first cousin once removed	62–469
106.25	1.56%	Second cousin once removed	14–353
		Half-second cousin	10–325
		First cousin three times removed	25–238
		Half-first cousin twice removed	16–269
53.13	0.78%	Third cousin	0–234
		Second cousin twice removed	0–244
26.56	0.391%	Third cousin once removed	0–192

*AncestryDNA, MyHeritage DNA, Living DNA and FamilyTreeDNA provide shared DNA in centimorgans (cM).

**23andMe and MyHeritage DNA provide shared DNA as a percentage.

***According to the Shared cM Project, a study of cMs shared by known relatives. For more information, see <www.dnainter.com/tools/sharedcmv4>.

TYPES OF DNA TESTS

Autosomal DNA

What it tests

22 non-sex chromosome pairs (called autosomes)

What it can do

- Locate genetic matches
- Help determine biological relationships
- Estimate your ethnicity
- Assist with DNA triangulation

Testing companies

- 23andMe
- LivingDNA
- AncestryDNA
- MyHeritage DNA
- Family Tree DNA

Key points

- **Autosomal DNA tests inform you about all your ancestors** within about the past five or six generations, male and female. This makes autosomal DNA useful for adoptees.
- **It's the most popular type of DNA test.** AncestryDNA alone has 15 million DNA profiles in its database. The bigger the database, the more likely you are to find a match.
- **This test provides you with a list of matches**—people with whom you share an ancestor. Use your match list when searching for your birth family.

X-DNA

What it tests

Genes on the X chromosome

What it can do

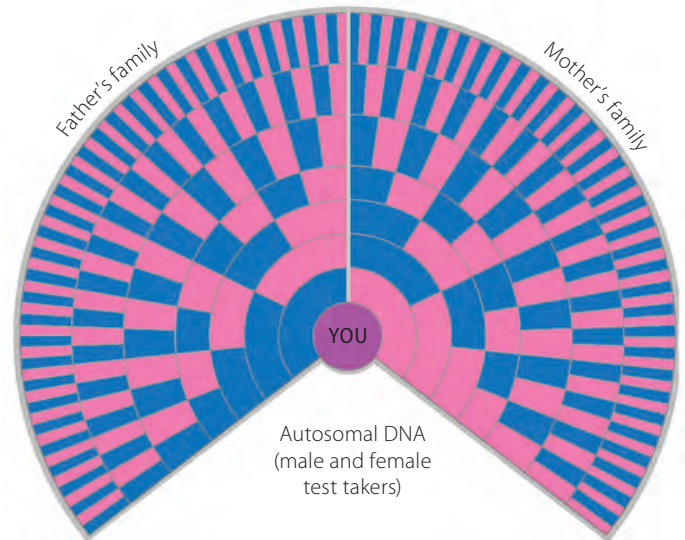
Help determine how you're related to a match

Testing companies

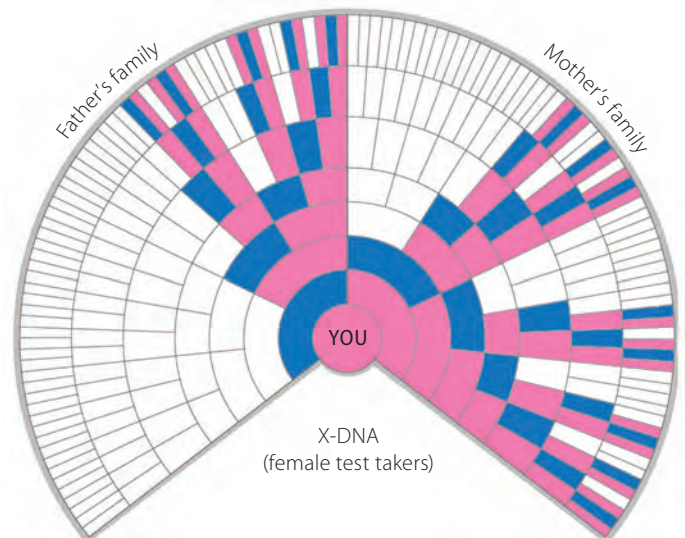
Those offering autosomal DNA testing

Key points

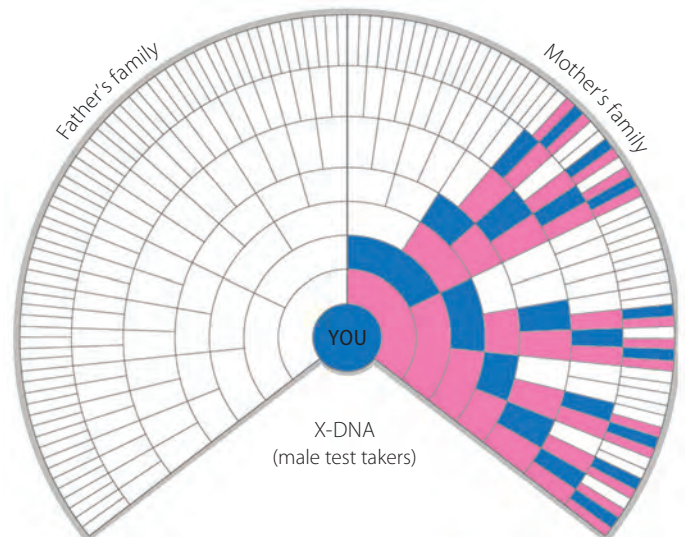
- **X-DNA data is part of autosomal DNA testing**, not a separate test. Only Family Tree DNA reports when you match someone on the X chromosome.
- **To find X matches using results from other testing companies**, upload your autosomal test results to the DNA analysis site GEDmatch <www.gedmatch.com>.
- **X-DNA has a complex inheritance pattern**, which you can use to narrow down your relationship to someone you match on the X chromosome. Women receive two X chromosomes, one from each parent. Men have only one X chromosome, received from the mother. The charts at right show potential ancestral contributors of X-DNA for a female test taker (top) and a male test taker (bottom).



Autosomal DNA can reveal information about any of your ancestors, regardless of your (or their) gender.



X-DNA inheritance is different for women (above) and men (below).



Mitochondrial DNA

What it tests

Genetic material in the cell's mitochondria

What it can do

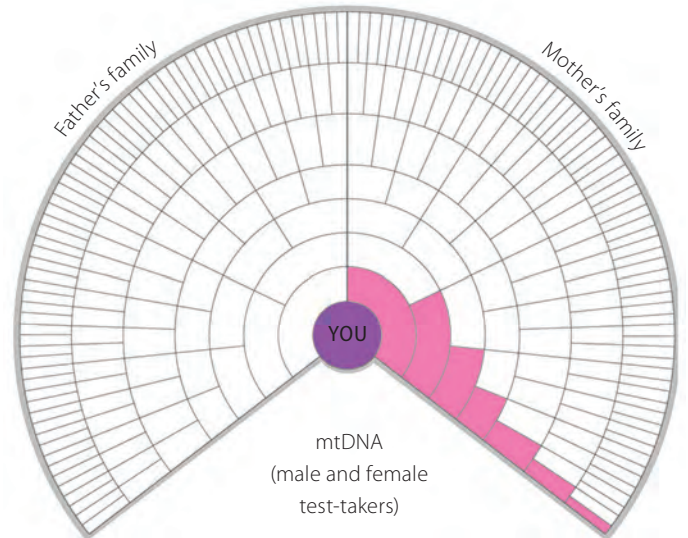
- Determine whether two individuals share a common maternal ancestor (but not who the ancestor is)
- Identify the mtDNA haplogroup (a broad genetic population group)

Testing company

Family Tree DNA

Key points

- **mtDNA is passed from a mother to her children**, both male and female. As a result, it informs you about your maternal line: mother, mother's mother, mother's mother's mother, etc.
- **It reveals ancient ancestry.** mtDNA mutates rarely, meaning that the ancestor you share with your mtDNA match may have lived thousands of years ago. For this reason, mtDNA isn't usually helpful when searching for unknown parents.



mtDNA testing provides genetic information about the maternal line, regardless of the test taker's gender.

Y-DNA

What it tests

Genes on the Y chromosome

What it can do

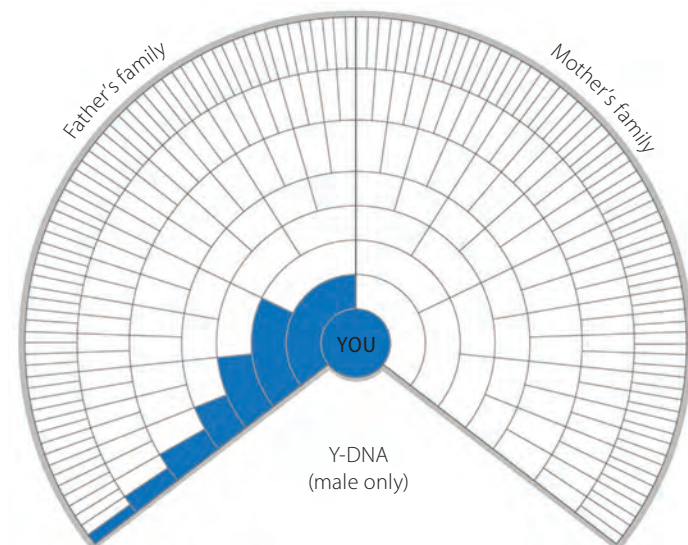
- Determine whether two men share a common paternal ancestor
- Identify the Y-DNA haplogroup

Testing company

Family Tree DNA offers a range of Y-DNA tests to examine different numbers of markers. Y-67, for example, tests 67 locations on the Y-DNA chromosome. The more markers, the more informative the test.

Key points

- **Y-DNA is passed from father to son** (just as surnames are in many cultures). As a result, Y-DNA can help you learn about your paternal line: father, father's father, father's father's father, etc.
- **Only males have Y chromosomes.** Women who want to learn about paternal ancestry through Y-DNA testing must test a known male relative born with the surname of interest (brother, father, father's brother, etc.).
- **Note matches' surnames.** For each Y-DNA match, you'll get an estimate of how long ago the shared ancestor lived. Testers seeking their birth fathers should pay attention to frequently occurring surnames in matches' family trees.



Men can use Y-DNA testing to learn about their paternal line.

ADOPTION REGISTRIES AND RESOURCES BY STATE

Adoption registries are among the most useful resources for discovering your biological family members. Some are operated by private agencies, while others are run by volunteers.

Still others are operated by state governments. Depending on the state, you could receive medical or psychological information about your birth parents.

The links on the pages that follow are to state resources, either adoption registries or pages dedicated to those seeking adoption records. The links are subject to change, but you can generally reach out to your state's health department for more information or to inquire about birth or adoption records.

Alabama

<www.alabamapublichealth.gov/vitalrecords/adoption-information.html>

Alaska

<dhss.alaska.gov/dph/vitalstats/pages/default.aspx>

Arizona

<www.azdhs.gov/licensing/vital-records/index.php#adoption-home>

Arkansas

<www.healthy.arkansas.gov/programs-services/topics/adoption-file-requests>

California

<www.cdss.ca.gov/adoptee-information>

Colorado

<cdphe.colorado.gov/adoption>

Connecticut

<portal.ct.gov/dph/vital-records/adoptions-and-foreign-births>

Delaware

<www.dhss.delaware.gov/dph/ss/files/adopted.pdf>

Florida

<www.adoptflorida.org/reunionregistry.shtml>

Georgia

<www.ga-adoptionreunion.com>

Hawaii

<www.courts.state.hi.us/docs/1FP/1FP767.pdf>
<www.courts.state.hi.us/docs/1FP/1FP770.pdf>

Idaho

<healthandwelfare.idaho.gov/services-programs/birth-marriage-death-records/registries>

Illinois

<www.dph.illinois.gov/topics-services/birth-death-other-records/adoption>

If you know what agency facilitated your (or your ancestor's) adoption, reach out to the organization or its successor to see if it has its own set of records. Even an index can give you valuable information if the full original record isn't available.

Indiana

<www.in.gov/isdh/20371.htm>

Iowa

<dhs.iowa.gov/adoption-records>

Kansas

<www.dcf.ks.gov/services/pps/pages/adoption-records-and-search.aspx>

Kentucky

<www.kyadoptions.com/adoptees.html>

Louisiana

<www.dcf.louisiana.gov/page/116>

Maine

<www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/cw/adoption/reunionregistry.htm>

Maryland

<dhr.maryland.gov/adoption/search-contract-and-reunion>

Massachusetts

<www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-a-pre-adoption-birth-record>

Michigan

<www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/0,5885,7-339-73971_7116_7125--,00.html>

Minnesota

<www.health.state.mn.us/people/vitalrecords/adoption.html>

Mississippi

<www.adopteerightslaw.com/mississippi-obc>

Missouri

<dss.mo.gov/cd/adoption/adoption-information-registry.htm>

Montana

<dphs.mt.gov/vitalrecords/contacts>

Nebraska

<supremecourt.nebraska.gov/sites/default/files/CC-17-7.pdf>

LEVELS OF INFORMATION

Some state organizations may only be able to give you “nonidentifying” information related to an adoption case, designed to balance each party’s privacy with a right to know the details of birth and/or adoption. Though laws vary, an adult (age 18 or over) adoptee can generally access nonidentifying information from the state upon written request, but identifying information often requires both parties’ consent. Here’s a rundown of each:

Nonidentifying Information

Details about a case that do not include the parties’ names, such as:

- Date and place of the adoptee’s birth
- Notes about the adoptee’s general health and history
- Ages of the birth parents
- Descriptions of birth parents: race, ethnicity, physical characteristics, medical history, level of education
- Reason for the adoption

Identifying Information

Details that could lead to a positive identification of the adoptee, the birth parents, or other the relatives, such as:

- Names
- Addresses, past or present
- Employment records

Nevada

<dcfs.nv.gov/Programs/CWS/Adoption/Guide/NVAdoptionReunion>

New Hampshire

<www.dhhs.nh.gov/dcyf/adoption/adoptees.htm>

New Jersey

<www.nj.gov/health/vital/adoption>

New Mexico

<www.nmadoptionsearch.com/procedure>

New York

<www.health.ny.gov/vital_records/adoption.htm>

North Carolina

<www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/social-services/child-welfare-services/adoption-and-foster-care/frequently-asked-questions>

North Dakota

<www.nd.gov/dhs/services/childfamily/adoption/disclosure.html>

Ohio

<odh.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/odh/know-our-programs/vital-statistics/Adoption-File-Information>

Oklahoma

<www.ok.gov/health2/documents/VR_openadoptionrd.pdf>

Oregon

<www.oregon.gov/dhs/children/adoption/Pages/registry.aspx>

Pennsylvania

<www.adoptpakids.org/Documents/PAIRBrochure.pdf>
<www.health.pa.gov/topics/certificates/Pages/Adoptions.aspx>

Rhode Island

<www.health.ri.gov/records/for/adultadoptees>

South Carolina

<www.southcarolinaadoptions.com>

South Dakota

<dss.sd.gov/childprotection/adoption/registry.aspx>

Tennessee

<sos.tn.gov/products/tsla/how-do-i-find-adoption-records>

Texas

<www.dshs.texas.gov/vs/reqproc/adoptionregistry.shtm>
<www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Adoption/Adoption_Registry/default.asp>

Utah

<adoptionregistry.utah.gov>

Vermont

<dcf.vermont.gov/vt-adoption-registry>

Virginia

<www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/dfs/ap/intro_page/guidance_procedures/records.pdf>

Washington (state)

<www.doh.wa.gov/LicensesPermitsandCertificates/VitalRecords/Adoptions>

Washington, DC

<www.dcd.uscourts.gov/adoption-petitions>

West Virginia

<www.wvdhhr.org/bcf/policy/adoption/Adoption_Policy.pdf> (sections 13.1 to 13.4)

Wisconsin

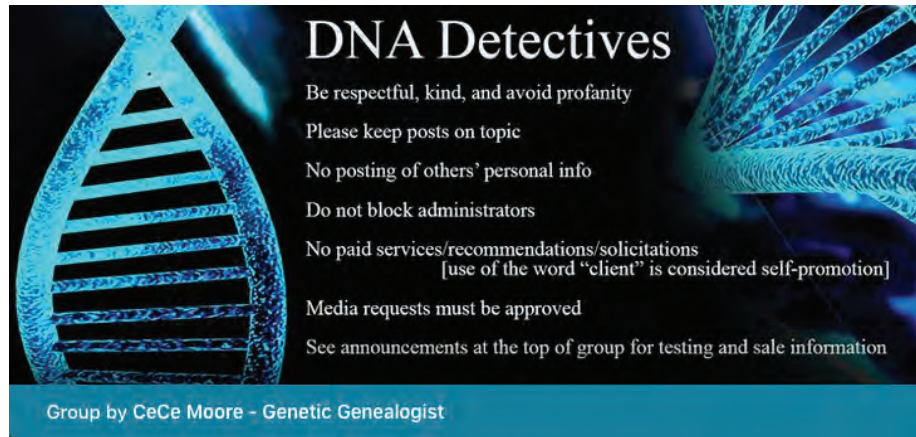
<dcf.wisconsin.gov/adoption/search>

Wyoming

<health.wyo.gov/admin/vitalstatistics/adoptions>

DNA Detectives: Search Angels Among Us

Overwhelmed by the task of finding your birth family? Consider consulting the DNA Detectives <www.facebook.com/groups/DNADetectives>, a Facebook group of volunteers who specialize in helping adoptees and others of unknown parentage. These “search angels” can help you interpret your DNA results and identify potential relatives. The group’s founder, genetic genealogist CeCe Moore, is perhaps best known for her DNA consulting work on the PBS series “Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.” Learn more about Moore at <www.thednadetectives.com>.



DNA Detectives

- Be respectful, kind, and avoid profanity
- Please keep posts on topic
- No posting of others' personal info
- Do not block administrators
- No paid services/recommendations/solicitations
[use of the word “client” is considered self-promotion]
- Media requests must be approved
- See announcements at the top of group for testing and sale information

Group by CeCe Moore - Genetic Genealogist

RESOURCES

Websites

Adopted.com

<www.adopted.com>

Adopted Reunion Registry

<registry.adoption.com>

Adoptee Rights Law Center

<www.adopteerightslaw.com>

Adoption.com

<www.adoption.com>

The ALMA Society

<www.almasociety.org>

The American Adoption Congress

<www.americanadoptioncongress.org>

DNA Detectives Facebook group

<www.facebook.com/groups/DNADetectives>

DNAAdoption.com

<www.dnaadoption.com>

FindMe.org

<www.findme.org>

G's Adoption Registry

<www.gsadoptionregistry.com>

International Soundex Reunion Registry

<www.isrr.org>

QuickBase Adoption Database

<adoptiondatabase.quickbase.com/db/bbqm94vvd>

Reunion Registry

<www.reunionregistry.org>

Search Squad Facebook group

<www.facebook.com/groups/searchhelpers>

Books

The Adoptee's Guide to DNA Testing by Tamar Weinberg (Family Tree Books)

Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives edited by E. Wayne Carp (University of Michigan Press)

The Family Tree Guide to DNA Testing and Genetic Genealogy by Blaine T. Bettinger (Family Tree Books)

Finding Family: My Search for Roots and the Secrets in My DNA by Richard Hill (Familius)

The Ultimate Search Book: U.S. Adoption, Genealogy & Other Search Secrets by Lori Carangelo (Genealogical Publishing Company)

DNA Testing Companies and Analysis Sites

23andMe

<www.23andme.com>

AncestryDNA

<www.ancestry.com/dna>

DNAGedcom

<www.dnagedcom.com>

Family Tree DNA

<www.familytreedna.com>

GEDmatch

<www.gedmatch.com>

LivingDNA

<www.livingdna.com>

MyHeritage DNA

<www.myheritage.com/dna>