

Searching for a biological parent via DNA

**this is by no means intended to be exhaustive. It's meant to be a brief introduction to the basic process for new researchers searching for a biological parent. All of us who have done searches have experienced more complicated scenarios.*

Searching for a biological parent and don't know where to start?

- 1) Let's begin with the assumption that you have tested at Ancestry or 23andme. You can download your data (see our files section for directions) and upload to FTDNA, MyHeritage, and GEDmatch for free. If you have high matches with trees, screenshot them for reference—sometimes people make trees private.
- 2) Now that you have your data in as many sites as possible, take a look at your matches. Don't go by the relationship estimates on the sites alone—see our green chart in the files section, or consult <https://dnainter.com/tools/sharedcmv4>. Determine who are your closest matches (any 2nd cousin or better?) as these are the ones you should focus on first.
- 3) Are you from an endogamous population (Ashkenazi, Polynesian, etc.)? Different rules will apply to you. Know that step #4 here won't apply to you unless your matches are *very* high. Step #5 may also be irrelevant depending on where you tested (23andme allows you to see how much your shared matches share with each other; Ancestry does not). FTDNA does not adequately filter for endogamy.
- 4) Not from an endogamous population? Then look at your matches—on Ancestry there's a "Shared Matches" button; on 23andme you can scroll down under the match and see who you and your match have in common; etc. Sort your matches into groups of people who are related to each other. You should see distinct clusters emerge, which you can organize on paper or in a spreadsheet (some people call this the Leeds method). Depending on your results, the ethnicity of matches may help you with your sorting.
- 5) If you know one of your parents, plot as many people as you can on the extensive tree you have built for them, and use the shared matches function so you can rule out as many people as possible from the known side and focus on the unknown side.
- 6) If you are on more than one site, GEDmatch can help you cross-reference results. DNA results that were uploaded to GEDmatch from before a certain date are coded by the company. Those from Ancestry start with A; 23andme kits are M; H is MyHeritage; T/F is FTDNA. You can then use the "one to many function" to sort there, and then look for the users on the other sites by their names.
- 7) Now what you need to do is figure out who the common ancestors are in each cluster—this is called triangulation. If they all share that common ancestor, chances are you do as well. To do this, you need to look at their ancestors. Maybe your matches have trees; maybe not. You may need to build out their trees, or build their trees.
- 8) Matches with underdeveloped trees: use Ancestry, Familysearch (free!), and Google to see if you can build their trees out. Googling the name of a match with the phrase "obituary" can help. Remember your local public library or university library may have subscriptions to databases you couldn't access otherwise—take advantage of this. State archives and local historical societies also have records online.

- 9) And if your match doesn't have a tree... click on their profile anyways, see what else comes up. Sometimes age and region are listed. Sometimes a match has a user name that can be Googled, that they also use elsewhere, that you can use to identify them. See if you can find them another way. If they are a close match, and share another close match with you, try Googling those names in combination and see what comes up.
- 10) Should you message your matches and ask? It seems easy, so why not? First, we strongly believe that only the person searching (the adoptee, the NPE, the DC person, the foundling, etc.) should be making contact with matches, not anyone who is helping them. As to messaging, sometimes people get worried about violating the privacy of family members, and may not respond as well to an inquiry they think is intrusive or potentially scandalous. If you are messaging your own matches, you might start by asking if they might be willing to share the names of their grandparents. That's innocuous and non-threatening. But really, it's your search, it's up to you.
- 11) Okay, so hopefully you now you have some triangulated ancestors. The next step is to see where those families intermarry. Ancestry and Familysearch might help; obituaries and newspaper accounts help. It sometimes helps to think laterally—if you get stuck on someone, move to a sibling. That sibling's obituary might list the married names of their siblings.
- 12) Are you stuck? Then trace down one line of triangulated ancestors, figure out who everybody marries, and then trace their spouses up to see if you hit another set of triangulated ancestors. Yes, it can be tedious. Remember, once again, to move outside of one database and try multiple ones.
- 13) Still stuck? Look at your matches again. Having done additional research, can you plot more of them now? Some will seem more obvious after doing the legwork above. If they are lower and on a specific branch of a family, you can rule that branch out. Look for the branch where you have very high matches, or—if you have no high matches—the branches where you have no matches.
- 14) By now you may have more data than you imagined, and possible candidates to focus on. This is where you apply your super sleuth skills. Maybe you have a profile from an adoption agency or a fertility clinic that you can cross-reference; maybe someone in your family remembers something. Take this social data and see if it matches anyone who would fit with the DNA data.
- 15) It's possible that having done all of this you are still stumped. Maybe you didn't have enough data—not your fault. Maybe the right person hasn't tested yet. Maybe you have a biological parent who was a recent immigrant. Maybe you haven't been able to crack a specific family line. Maybe the cms don't make sense. *Never be afraid to ask for help.* While our group rules prohibit naming living people, we are more than happy to discuss DNA matches and strategies for interpreting your DNA and resolving your mystery.

This document was composed on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples.