

BEFORE TAKING A DNA TEST

The complete pre-test checklist — choose the right test, protect your privacy, and know what to expect

Before you begin — quick glossary:

Autosomal DNA test — the standard DNA test (used by AncestryDNA, 23andMe, MyHeritage, FTDNA's Family Finder) that covers all of your family lines — this is what almost everyone should start with.

Y-DNA / mtDNA test — specialised tests that trace only one single line — Y-DNA follows the direct father's-father's-father line (males only), mtDNA follows the direct mother's-mother's-mother line (everyone has this).

Raw DNA data — the underlying file of your genetic data, downloadable from your test company, which can be uploaded (usually free) to other sites to widen your match pool.

Opt-in / opt-out matching — your setting for whether other testers can see and contact you as a match. Usually on by default — genealogy only works if enough people opt in.

Work through this once, before you order any test. Five minutes of preparation now saves confusion later and means you're never caught off guard by what a DNA test can reveal.

Phase 1 — Get clear on your goal before you pick anything

- ☐ Decide your primary reason for testing — *ethnicity curiosity, building a family tree, connecting with living relatives, health insights, or solving a specific genealogical mystery — your answer affects which company and test type suits you best*
- ☐ Consider whether an older relative should test instead of, or alongside, you — *★ a parent, grandparent, or great-aunt/uncle's test is worth far more genealogically than your own — they sit one or two generations closer to the ancestors you're researching, and their matches are cleaner and easier to sort*
- ☐ Confirm you need a standard autosomal test, not a specialised one — *autosomal DNA (see glossary) covers all family lines and is right for almost everyone; only add Y-DNA or mtDNA later for a specific deep single-line question*

Phase 2 — Choose the right company (or companies)

- ☐ Compare match database size if finding relatives matters to you — *AncestryDNA has the largest database (40M+ users), giving the best odds of a useful match*
- ☐ Compare built-in tools if you want to go deeper — *FamilyTreeDNA offers Y-DNA/mtDNA testing plus a native chromosome browser; MyHeritage tends to be strongest for European and international matches; 23andMe is strongest for health reports and its "DNA Relatives" close-match tool*
- ☐ Decide: test with one company and upload elsewhere for free, or test directly with several — *uploading your raw data (once tested) to GEDmatch, MyHeritage, and FTDNA is free and widens your match pool cheaply — note that 23andMe does not accept uploads, so you must test directly with them if their tools matter to you*
- ☐ Check current pricing and sale periods before ordering — *prices fluctuate significantly around holidays (especially late November and around Mother's/Father's Day) — search for current deals rather than assuming list price*

Phase 3 — Understand privacy and data-sharing settings before you order

- ☐ Check each company's policy on law-enforcement matching — *GEDmatch and FamilyTreeDNA allow opt-in law-enforcement matching for violent crime cases; AncestryDNA, 23andMe, and MyHeritage do not permit this by default*
- ☐ Decide your matching visibility preference — *opt in if you want to be found by biological relatives (the setting most genealogists want on); opt out if you're not ready to be contacted yet — you can usually change this later*
- ☐ Decide whether to allow research use of your data — *this is a separate, optional consent in most companies — read it rather than clicking through automatically*
- ☐ Understand that deleting your data later doesn't undo past contact — *you can delete your raw data and account afterward, but any matches you've already messaged or who saved your information will still have it*

Phase 4 — Prepare yourself for what you might find

- ☐ Understand that any DNA test can reveal the unexpected — *an unknown half-sibling, a surprise about parentage (an NPE — Not Parent Expected result), or an ethnicity breakdown that doesn't match family stories*
- ☐ Talk to close family before testing if you suspect a family secret might exist — *not to avoid the truth, but so you're not processing a surprise completely alone if one appears*
- ☐ Decide in advance how private or public you want to keep any results — *with your spouse, siblings, or parents — deciding this before you have actual results removes one layer of stress if something unexpected turns up*
- ☐ Bookmark the NPE Research Checklist now, before you test — *so you know exactly where to go if a surprise appears, rather than searching for guidance while already unsettled*

Phase 5 — Practical test-day logistics

- ☐ Follow the collection instructions exactly — *most saliva kits require no food, drink, gum, or smoking for at least 30 minutes beforehand — a contaminated sample can delay results by weeks*
- ☐ Register the kit online BEFORE mailing it back — *this step links the physical sample to your account — skipping it is one of the most common reasons for a lost or delayed result*
- ☐ Write down your kit number and registration date somewhere safe — *you'll want this if you ever need to contact customer support*
- ☐ Mail the sample promptly, using tracked shipping if it's offered — *a sample sitting in a mailbox for weeks in extreme heat or cold can occasionally degrade*

Phase 6 — Set up your tools while you wait

- ☐ Build out your known family tree as far as you can from memory and existing documents — *have this ready before results arrive so you can immediately compare matches against it*
- ☐ Create free accounts on GEDmatch and DNA Painter now — *so you're not starting from zero when matches start appearing*
- ☐ Set a calendar reminder for the typical results window instead of checking daily — *most companies quote 4–8 weeks; checking obsessively won't speed it up and just adds stress*
- ☐ Read through the After Receiving Your Results Checklist now — *so you know exactly what to do the moment your results are ready*

Pro tip: Testing with the oldest living relative on a given family line will almost always teach you more than testing yourself alone. Their DNA sits one or two generations closer to the ancestors you're researching, so their matches are cleaner, closer, and far easier to sort into the right branch of the tree.