

UPDATE – DNA FOR AGS

By Philip Spivey, AGS Member

DNA: It's All About Fishing



One of the first things people ask me when they want to get started with DNA is “Where should I test?” Unfortunately, the best first answer I can give them is, “It depends.”

People test for different reasons. Some are curious about ethnicity and some have medical questions. For ethnicity, all the major testing services offer those reports. They vary a bit, but they are all about the same. For medical, see a doctor. The results you get from genealogy testing services are interesting, but they don't diagnose anything.

However, when it comes to adoptees looking for biological family or family historians trying to build a tree, “it's all about fishing.”



The genealogy-based DNA testing services have done over 30 million DNA tests in recent years. That is a huge amount of DNA swimming around in the genealogy pond. When we test at one of these services, they give us a list of other people that tested at the same service who share DNA with us. We call them “matches.” By comparing their DNA to ours and their family trees to ours, we can often solve many family history mysteries. Success depends on finding close matches. The more DNA we share with someone, the more reliable and helpful those matches usually are. No matter where we test, the only matches we get are those that tested at the same service. So, to some extent, it comes down to fishing in the biggest pond. The more fish (testers) in the pond, the better our chances of catching good ones. There are different kinds of DNA tests, but the one that has the most usages is the Autosomal test offered by all the major services, so that will be the focus of this article. See the chart below for how the ponds compare.

As you can see, AncestryDNA is the big dog by far. Your best chance of finding good matches is going to be Ancestry. Some of the other testing services have different and, in some cases, better analytical tools, but Ancestry is going to have better odds of finding usable matches. So, I recommend fishing in the biggest pond with the most fish, AncestryDNA.

Having said that though, there is no reason to stop there. You can download your test data from AncestryDNA and upload it to FamilyTreeDNA, MyHeritage and LivingDNA without paying for another test. You may need to pay a small fee to analyze those results, but you save on testing. Once again, the more ponds you fish in, the more likely you are to catch great matches.

If none of these ponds work for you, you can also test at 23andMe. When I first tested, my best match actually came from 23andMe.

Each testing service has both strengths and weaknesses. The bottom line though is fish where the fish are. The other thing to keep in mind is that more people are testing every day. That means your match list will continue to grow, so keep checking back. DNA testing is like pizza, it is frequently on sale, so never pay full price. Wait a couple of months and you are sure to get a bargain. See the following links for more information.

<https://www.ancestry.com/>
<https://www.23andme.com/>
<https://www.myheritage.com/>
<https://www.familytreedna.com/>
<https://livingdna.com/>
<https://isogg.org/>

Testing Service	Tests in the Database	Accepts Transfers
AncestryDNA	18 million +	No
23andMe	10 million +	No
FamilyTreeDNA	1 million + (unreported est.)	Yes
MyHeritage	3.9 million +	Yes
LivingDNA	Too small for matching so far	Yes

Source: International Society of Genetic Genealogy: Autosomal DNA testing comparison chart.