

Would You Like To Compare Our Genomes?

Adoptee Laureen Pittman shares her notes and advice on corresponding with DNA relatives.

I know I got lucky.

I hit the adoptee jackpot when I submitted my saliva sample to 23andMe and found my birth father a few weeks later. It was a total surprise. A little bit of a miracle, really. He wasn't looking for me. He didn't even know I existed. He got the surprise of his life when I wrote to him and told him he had a daughter.

Imagine writing *that* letter. What do you write to a man you've never met, but whose chromosomes you share? (The long story answer, including letters, is included in [Genetic Testing: Miracles and Science](#)). The short story is, it took some convincing that our match was not a mistake. My biological father, Jackson, never imagined he had a 50-year old daughter. When we initially exchanged information, he explained that he joined 23andMe hoping to learn more about his own biological father's family. He'd been told that his father died when he was young, and so his mother raised him alone. As Jackson got older and asked more questions about his origins, she never gave him any meaningful details. So there he was, like me, trying to fill in holes in his family tree. So I helped him, and hope to help you too by sharing some advice on what I learned in the process.

Once your sample is processed with 23andMe, you'll be notified that your results are available. First, you'll want to check out your Ancestry Composition, which estimates what percentage of your DNA comes from populations around the world, broken down by geographic regions to show the origins of your ancestors going back many generations.

Then, if you're interested in making connections with potential relatives, you'll want to opt in to 23andMe's DNA Relatives feature. This is where the correspondence begins.

Once you opt in, you will most likely receive requests from cousins and other distant relatives building their family trees (although, in some cases, like mine, you might find a father or mother immediately). Often times, cousins may have no idea there was an adoption in the family. They might ask you for surnames so that they can determine where you fit in their family tree. Your adoptive surname, however, will have no relevance to their tree, so you'll need to be prepared to tell your story.

For example, I received this request from a 2nd to 3rd cousin match. He asked the typical questions, using a template provided by 23andMe:

Hi—Through our shared DNA, 23andMe has identified us as relatives. Our predicted relationship is a 2nd cousin. Would you like to

compare our genomes? By sharing genomes we can compare our DNA using ancestry features and discover clues about how we are related. Surnames in my family: Mann, Bailey, Schmidt. I live in Northern California now, and I'm in my late 50's. This is my first experience with 23andMe—interesting! —Andy M.

As expected, none of those names meant anything to me. The only way to find out how we were related—and perhaps help my biological father solve his own mystery—was to share my story with this virtual stranger, so I wrote:

Hi Andy—23andMe is most definitely “interesting!” Here is the information I have about my biological family—maybe you can help me put some of the puzzle pieces together and see how we may be related.

Unfortunately, the surnames you provided don't mean anything to me, but there is a reason for that. Perhaps they will mean something to me after we exchange information (I am hopeful!).

I was adopted as an infant. Hubachek is my adopted name, so it won't help you with your relative search. But I do have some information that may be able to help you.

I was able to locate my biological mother 25 years ago. Her name is Margaret Michaels, born in Chicago in 1945. Her mother's name is Eve (maiden name Beryl). I do not know her father's first name, but I assume his last name was Michaels (I was born “Baby Girl Michaels”). Margaret never told me whom my biological father was (she has refused contact with me—it's a complicated story), but I was able to find him through 23andMe. His name is Jackson Summer and he currently lives in Washington State. He was born in 1943—I'm not sure where, but he grew up in Santa Barbara, CA (as did Margaret).

Perhaps you are a match with Jackson? If there is any other information I can give to you, I'd be happy to. Perhaps the surnames I've listed here mean something to you. Looking forward to hearing from you again. —Laureen

My advice to anyone pursuing a search for relatives through DNA testing is to respond to all types of contact requests. Someone out there knows your truth. They may not know they know, and you may not think that these distant relatives can provide useful information, but you never know when a scrap of information will help make random clues come together.

I didn't hear from Andy for about six months. Then this:

Hi Laureen—Have you been in touch with Jackson Summer? My 88-year-old mom recently wrote to me. Can you forward this to him? Hope

you're doing well. – Andy M.

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From my mom to me [Andy]:

Jackson is the son of my Uncle Richard, your grandfather's older brother who had come to this country before your grandfather.

Richard Schmidt was married to Katherine and had 2 children: Franz and Marybeth. Living in those days many miles apart, I believe I only saw him once when the family drove to Southern California when I was very young.

After WWII, I lost track of what Uncle Richard was doing. It wasn't until I was married that I learned that Uncle Richard had had an affair while married to his first wife, Katherine. Of course, everything was very hush-hush. He and Katherine were divorced and the "other woman," whose name was Mollie Summer, had a child.
– Heide

Wow, Andy shared my information with his mother, who recognized the name "Summer." Mystery solved! I had not only found my biological father, but I was able to help him find his biological father (my grandfather) and complete my family tree.

Sometimes adoptees searching for relatives through DNA testing spend months or even years waiting for a life-changing match, and sometimes it happens quickly, so send out those contact requests. Respond to requests sent to you. Share your story. Share it over and over again if you have to.

Soon I'll be meeting Jackson for the first time, and his 88 year old cousin, Heide, too. The woman who shared her knowledge of the past and opened up the future for Jackson and me.

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