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DNA fingerprinting is a chemical test that shows the genetic makeup of a person or other living things. It’s used as evidence in courts, to identify bodies, track down blood relatives, and to look for cures for disease.

DNA fingerprinting, also called DNA typing, DNA profiling, genetic fingerprinting, genotyping, or identity testing, in genetics, method of isolating and identifying variable elements within the base-pair sequence of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid). The technique was developed in 1984 by British geneticist Alec Jeffreys, after he noticed that certain sequences of highly variable DNA (known as minisatellites), which do not contribute to the functions of genes, are repeated within genes. Jeffreys recognized that each individual has a unique pattern of minisatellites (the only exceptions being multiple individuals from a single zygote, such as identical twins).

The procedure for creating a DNA fingerprint consists of first obtaining a sample of cells, such as skin, hair, or blood cells, which contain DNA. The DNA is extracted from the cells and purified. In Jeffreys’s original approach, which was based on restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP) technology, the DNA was then cut at specific points along the strand with proteins known as restriction enzymes. The enzymes produced fragments of varying lengths that were sorted by placing them on a gel and then subjecting the gel to an electric current (electrophoresis): the shorter the fragment, the more quickly it moved toward the positive pole (anode). The sorted double-stranded DNA fragments were then subjected to a blotting technique in which they were split into single strands and transferred to a nylon sheet. The fragments underwent autoradiography in which they were exposed to DNA probes—pieces of synthetic DNA that were made radioactive and that bound to the minisatellites. A piece of X-ray film was then exposed to the fragments, and a dark mark was produced at any point where a radioactive probe had become attached. The resultant pattern of marks could then be analyzed.

The assay developed by Jeffreys has been supplanted by approaches that are based on the use of the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and so-called microsatellites (or short tandem repeats, STRs), which have shorter repeat units (typically 2 to 4 base pairs in length) than minisatellites (10 to more than 100 base pairs in length). PCR amplifies the desired fragment of DNA (e.g., a specific STR) many times over, creating thousands of copies of the fragment. It is an automated procedure that requires only small amounts of DNA as starting material and works even with partially degraded DNA. Once an adequate amount of DNA has been produced with PCR, the exact sequence of nucleotide pairs in a segment of DNA can be determined by using one of several biomolecular sequencing methods. Automated equipment has greatly increased the speed of DNA sequencing and has made available many new practical applications, including pinpointing segments of genes that cause genetic diseases, mapping the human genome, engineering drought-resistant plants, and producing biological drugs from genetically altered bacteria.

An early use of DNA fingerprinting was in legal disputes, notably to help solve crimes and to determine paternity. Since its development, DNA fingerprinting has led to the conviction of numerous criminals and to the freeing from prison of many individuals who were wrongly convicted. However, making scientific identification coincide exactly with legal proof is often problematic. Even a single suggestion of the possibility of error is sometimes enough to persuade a jury not to convict a suspect. Sample contamination, faulty preparation procedures, and mistakes in interpretation of results are major sources of error. In addition, RFLP requires large amounts of high-quality DNA, which limits its application in forensics. Forensic DNA samples frequently are degraded or are collected postmortem, which means that they are lower-quality and subject to producing less-reliable results than samples that are obtained from a living individual. Some of the concerns with DNA fingerprinting, and specifically the use of RFLP, subsided with the development of PCR- and STR-based approaches.

DNA fingerprinting is based on the distribution of small repetitive elements called "minisatellites" that are contained in the cellular DNA, or deoxyribonucleic acid, of an organism. The technique is also known as DNA profiling, DNA typing or genetic fingerprinting. Since each cell of an organism contains the same DNA, the technique can be used to identify individuals. Several techniques are available to visualize the distribution pattern of mini-satellites with applications in genetic research, paternity testing, family genealogy, agriculture and forensic genetics for crime investigation.

Genetic Research

DNA fingerprinting is often used to identify genetic disorders.•••

In 1984, Alec Jeffreys, a British geneticist, identified the presence of minisatellites within the boundaries of genes. These minisatellites do not contribute to the functioning of genes and are distributed throughout the cellular DNA of an organism in a unique and inheritable pattern. The DNA fingerprint can be revealed by processing cells collected from individuals through one of several different techniques. These different techniques for genetic fingerprinting have been applied to identify and isolate disease genes, develop cures for diseased genes, and diagnose genetic diseases.

Paternity Testing

Testing paternity samples requires the collection of cells and comparison of DNA fingerprints from and between children and potential parents. Children will have a mix of DNA fingerprints inherited from each parent. When a child is conceived, each parent provides half of the genetic information. Most often the test is performed when the mother of the child is known but the father is in question. Since it is highly unlikely that any two people will have the same genetic fingerprint, paternity testing using DNA fingerprints is a reliable way to determine the parentage of a child.

Genetic Forensics

Crime scenes and evidence can be a source of biological samples.•••

A crime scene can contain biological samples, including blood, semen, saliva, skin, urine and hair, from perpetrators, victims and bystanders that can be processed to provide DNA fingerprints. The DNA fingerprints obtained are used to search existing databases for matches and to identify victims or suspects. The biological evidence and the DNA fingerprints can be used in trials to help prove guilt or innocence. The United States military has been storing DNA fingerprints of all military personnel for identification of casualties and those missing in action. The military has found the technology to be superior to identification methods used previously.

Plants and Animals

DNA fingerprinting of plants and animals is performed for food security, food safety, identification and parentage. In food animals, DNA fingerprinting can be used to trace meat to the source animal. The technique can be used to identify endangered and non-endangered fish species, while the sources of plants can be verified to prevent counterfeiting of seeds and stock. Pathogenic food organisms can be quickly identified by their DNA fingerprints, allowing doctors to provide timely, targeted treatment.