

# Facebook app encourages individuals to get in touch with their DNA

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Have you ever wondered if your dad's fight with prostate cancer means you could face the same reality? Or perhaps your family has several members who have struggled with obesity and you wonder if it's something you inherited or if it's caused by the environment.

Good news: researchers at the University of Michigan School of Public Health and the University of Colorado Boulder have an app for that.

A new project that officially launches March 31 called Genes for Good gives participants the chance to learn more about their health, behavior and ancestors. In return, those who fully participate provide genetics researchers with valuable data that can be used to better understand the origins of disease, which could lead one day to better treatments, prevention and cures.

"It's really a research study that offers us a chance to engage with lots of people and get better information on behavior, environment and so on," said Goncalo Abecasis, chair of the U-M School of Public Health's Department of Biostatistics and the Felix E. Moore Collegiate Professor of Biostatistics.

Genes for Good uses a Facebook app. Users fill out various health and behavior surveys. Once a certain amount of data is submitted each participant is sent a spit kit to use to provide a saliva sample for genetic analysis.

Scott Vrieze, a co-investigator at the University of Michigan before becoming an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at CU-Boulder, said this approach to providing genetic information to people is different from the commercial products.

"We're a research group, not a company, so our goals involve scientific understanding, not profit," he said. "More concretely, participants can have their DNA analyzed, with the results of that analysis, their genotype, returned to them free of cost. Participants can also track components of their health and activity over time and compare themselves to others in the study."

The data collected through various questionnaires and results from the [saliva samples](#) will give genetic researchers more information to build on existing data. Abecasis and his lab have been involved in numerous genetic studies, and their work has contributed to a better understanding of diabetes, heart disease, addiction, obesity, macular degeneration, psoriasis and more.

"Facebook is a place where people already spend considerable time," Abecasis said. "We put a very short question in Facebook streams to remind people to submit information. We hope people will find it engaging and stick with it."

Vrieze said that even though they are using a very public program, the user's personal data is secure.

"While Genes for Good is available through Facebook, it's important to note that Facebook or any other social media platform does not have access to the information participants provide," Vrieze said. The information is encrypted with a secure University of Michigan server, according to the researchers.

"Science has always been a social endeavor, but traditionally only for researchers," said Vrieze, who also is a fellow in CU-Boulder's Institute for Behavioral Genetics. "Facebook and other social media platforms are simple ways to engage large numbers of people and, if those people like it, they can immediately share with friends and families."

Like all apps in Facebook, however, privacy settings within the program determine if friends or the public are aware that the participant is using the app.

"Understanding the genetics of complex behaviors and diseases will benefit immensely from massive samples of dedicated [participants](#)," Vrieze said. An eventual goal is to make the platform and resulting data widely available to the scientific community at no cost, so that others may develop new measures or new analyses. Personal identifiers, such as names and phone numbers, will not be shared.

Participants can choose to do the profile only, but those who provide a saliva sample will get information on ancestry and their genetic profile.

**More information:** For more information on Genes for Good, visit [genesforgood.sph.umich.edu](http://genesforgood.sph.umich.edu).

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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