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## Beware geeks baring genes

Posted by [Andy Dworkin](#), [The Oregonian](#) January 01, 2009 08:00AM

Consumers should be wary of increasingly marketed genetic tests that claim to reveal your ethnic ancestry, according to the American Society of Human Genetics, an organization of scientific experts on gene testing.

Companies are selling tests -- some for under \$100 -- that check for certain markers in your DNA that tend to cluster in various ethnic groups. The companies often make bold claims for their products, such as letting African-Americans see which part of Africa their ancestors came from, or whether they may belong to a Native American tribe. Some students have used the tests [to pursue race-based scholarships](#).

Similar tests have been used to deduce patterns of human migration over many generations.

The trouble is, genetic markers may tend to be more common in one race, but aren't exclusive. So trends that prove accurate when measuring lots of people in a population can be wrong in individuals, leading them astray. The tests also have margins of error, and may not come with much interpretative help -- telling you what it means to have 4 percent Middle Eastern heritage, for instance.

"Consumers, as well as scientists, must remember that ancestry testing inferences are fallible, and that over-interpretation or misinterpretation can happen," warned Dr. Edward McCabe, president-elect of the genetics society. "Inaccurate results may be confusing and life-changing, therefore greater efforts are needed to make the limitations of ancestry testing more explicit."

The society issued a statement outlining their concerns and advice for consumers considering the test.

-- [Andy Dworkin](#); [andydworkin@news.oregonian.com](mailto:andydworkin@news.oregonian.com)

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