



Pentagon's Warning on DNA Testing is Applicable to all Consumers

By ARMA International



On December 23, [Yahoo News](#)¹ reported on a Department of Defense [memo](#)² warning military personnel that using direct-to-consumer (DTC) DNA testing could pose “personal and operational risks.” Notably, in its opening paragraph, the missive cites “unintended security consequences and increased risk to the joint force and mission.”

In other words, the Pentagon is concerned about hostile entities using such biometric data to better surveil and track the military. Two paragraphs later, this point is made more clearly:

“[T]here is increased concern in the scientific community that outside parties are exploiting the use of genetic data for questionable purposes, including mass surveillance and the ability to track individuals without their authorization or awareness.”

The memo also raises concerns about the accuracy of medical information some testing services purport to offer and how that can impact military service members in particular.

In an email to the *Military Times*, a Pentagon spokesman subtly downplayed the concerns about tracking and focused instead on the quality and reliability of the testing companies. As

¹ McLaughlin, Jenna and Dorfman, Zach. Yahoo News. “Exclusive: Pentagon warns military members DNA kits pose ‘personal and operational risks.’” December 23, 2019.

² “DoD Warning on DNA Testing.” Office of the Secretary of Defense. December 20, 2019.

quoted in the *Military Times* [article](#)³, citing security risks, Cmdr. Sean Robertson wrote that the Defense Department wanted to make sure its members know that some of the companies “may or may not provide reliable, accurate results.”

Writing for [Forbes.com](#)⁴, Ellen Matloff, a certified genetics counselor, agrees the testing companies may not be the most reliable for providing medical information – and that, indeed, errant health data can negatively impact military members because they are not covered by the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act, which is designed to prevent employers and insurers from discriminating based on genetic information.

But Matloff suggests it’s the concerns about surveillance that are truly front and center.

In her December 27 column, she writes: “But are there other reasons the Pentagon may be warning against recreational genetic test kits? Could this genetic information lead to genetic surveillance, tracking, and grave privacy concerns for military personnel and others who use these kits?”

DTC DNA testing, sold by 23andMe, Ancestry, and others, provides consumers with data about their lineage and may provide medical profiles that can allegedly pinpoint health risks. For years, ethicists, civil rights groups, privacy advocates, and others have raised concerns about the dangers of the creation of national genetic databases and the potential for their abuse. State and federal governments already have criminal DNA databases, but calls for mandatory, national databases were resisted. Today, somewhat ironically, consumers *are voluntarily paying* to have their genetic information collected. Further, because an individual’s DNA reveals genetic information about genetic relatives, too, we may be well on our way to having effectively created a national genetic database.

More than two years ago, in December 2017, the FTC also raised concerns about DTC genetic testing and encouraged consumers to be selective in choosing which DNA-testing companies to use. The [memo](#)⁵, designed for a general audience, made no mention of surveillance or tracking, specifically, but did encourage consumers to be mindful of privacy concerns and make sure they understand how their genetic information may be used.

Even if companies agree that genetic information will not be used beyond some limited genealogy testing purpose, risks of data breach or subpoenas still exist. Consumers need to be attuned to the risks of so easily handing over sensitive data about themselves and relatives.

³ Snow, Shawn. *Military Times*. “Pentagon advises troops to not use consumer DNA kits.” December 24, 2019.

⁴ Matloff, Ellen. *Forbes.com*. “Why The Pentagon Is Warning US Military Not To Use Recreational Genetic Test Kits.” December 27, 2019.

⁵ Fair, Lesley. *Consumer.FTC.Gov*. “DNA test kits: Consider the privacy implications.” December 12, 2017.