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Looking for Love In All the Right Alleles

By Brandon Keim  September 08, 2008 | 7:53:33 PM Categories: [Behavior](#), [Genetics](#), [Reproduction](#)



Salsa dancing, moonlit walks, fireside chats and human leukocyte antigen: Welcome to the genetically romantic age.

Swiss startup company GenePartner is offering to evaluate singles and couples according to the potential union of their HLA genes, which help regulate immune response.

People may naturally be attracted to mates with HLA profiles different from their own, ostensibly guaranteeing the hybrid vigor of their offspring's immune systems -- and also providing a spark that will last through good times and bad.

"Proper age, similar life goals and ideas, education levels -- all of these things have to fit. And on top of that, you need to be biologically compatible," said Tamara Brown, managing director of GenePartner.

But not everyone is convinced that scientists can read the genome of love.

"These kinds of ideas are not as crazy as they often sound, but before you start trying to sell this kind of thing, we'd like to have solid evidence," said [Dustin Penn](#), a behavioral biologist at the Konrad Lorenz Institute for Ethology. "There's some supporting evidence, but it's mixed."

The science of HLA love started with Swiss biologist [Claus Wedekind](#), who in 1995 found that women preferred the smell of T-shirts worn by men with HLA profiles dissimilar to their own. The findings were [replicated](#), and a [later study](#) showed that couples with similar profiles were less likely to have children and more likely to cheat on each other.

GenePartner claims to have pushed that research forward. "Is there a specific pattern? That's what we found. That's the main strength of the algorithm," Brown said.

Singles who take the test receive a rating that can be integrated with online dating profiles, while couples can test their long-term compatibility -- even more important, said Brown, in light of research on the [interference of birth control pills](#) with natural HLA preference.

Penn didn't comment on GenePartner's research, which has yet to be published. "I'd be interested to see what their claims are," he said. "The idea that HLA plays a role in attraction, the jury is still out."

Asked about the earlier studies, Penn said, "This is a problem of science: You get selective citations." Studies that don't support earlier findings tend to be overlooked, and don't appear in prominent journals or atop database rankings.

"There's a handful of positive studies, but there's a lot of negative," he said.

Of scientific doubts and *Gattaca*-inspired fears, Brown replied, "They can make use of it now, or they can wait until it gets established. They just have to keep in mind it might mean they'll have to wait longer until they've found the person to share their life with."

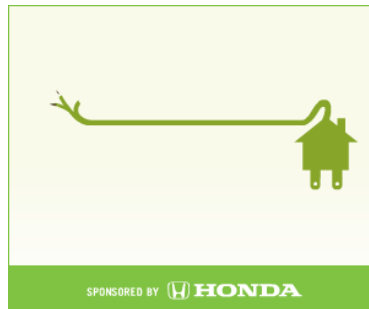
Brown herself was married before the algorithm was finalized.

"Of course I did the test, and it came out good. As we expected it would," she said.

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