

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Nucleic Acids

The blueprint for the reproduction and the maintenance of each organism is found in the nuclei of its cells, concentrated in elongated, threadlike structures called chromosomes. These complex structures, consisting of DNA and proteins, contain the basic units of heredity, called genes. The number of chromosomes (and genes) varies with each species. Human body cells have 23 pairs of chromosomes having 20,000–40,000 different genes.

Sperm and egg cells contain only a single copy of each chromosome; that is, they contain only one member of each chromosome pair. Thus, in sexual reproduction, the entire complement of chromosomes is achieved only when an egg and sperm combine. A new individual receives half its hereditary material from each parent. Calling the unit of heredity a “gene” merely gives it a name. But what really are genes and how is the information they contain expressed? One definition of a gene is that it is a segment of DNA that constitutes the code for a specific polypeptide. If genes are segments of DNA, we need to learn more about the structure and physiological function of DNA. We begin by looking at the small molecules needed to form DNA and RNA (ribonucleic acid)—the nucleotides.

[9.1: Nucleotides](#)

[9.2: Nucleic Acid Structure](#)

[9.3: DNA Replication and Transcription](#)

[9.4: RNA Translation and Protein Synthesis](#)

[9.5: Mutations and Genetic Diseases](#)

[9.6: Viruses](#)

[9.E: Nucleic Acids \(Exercises\)](#)

[9.S: Nucleic Acids \(Summary\)](#)

Template:HideTOC

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