

18.13: Genetic Code

The Human Genome Project started in 1990 with the lofty goal of sequencing the complete set of human DNA. This project was completed in April 2003, ahead of schedule and under the budget set for it (a rare occurrence for a government project). With this knowledge, we can now identify genetic disorders quickly and personalize treatment for many diseases. However, much work still remains to fully understand the connections between specific DNA sequences and specific diseases.

The Genetic Code

Each particular organism contains many protein molecules that are specific to that organism. The particular base sequence of DNA is responsible for the production of all of the different proteins that are present in each and every living thing that has ever inhabited the Earth. How does that work? Cells use the unique sequence of DNA bases to decide which proteins to synthesize. A **gene** is a segment of DNA that carries a code for making a specific polypeptide chain. The cell essentially decodes the DNA in order to make whatever peptides and proteins are needed by that organism.

The **genetic code** works as a series of three-letter codes. Each sequence of three letters, called a triplet, corresponds to one of the twenty common amino acids. The triplets are read by the cell, one after the other, in the process of protein synthesis. The table below shows all of the possible triplets and the amino acids that result from each three-letter code.

Table 18.13.1: DNA Triplet Codes for Amino Acids

DNA Triplet Codes for Amino Acids							
AAA	Lys	GAA	Glu	TAA	Stop	CAA	Gln
AAG	Lys	GAG	Glu	TAG	Stop	CAG	Gln
AAT	Asn	GAT	Asp	TAT	Tyr	CAT	His
AAC	Asn	GAC	Asp	TAC	Tyr	CAC	His
AGA	Arg	GGA	Gly	TGA	Stop	CGA	Arg
AGG	Arg	GGG	Gly	TGG	Trp	CGG	Arg
AGT	Ser	GGT	Gly	TGT	Cys	CGT	Arg
AGC	Ser	GGC	Gly	TGC	Cys	CGC	Arg
ATA	Ile	GTA	Val	TTA	Leu	CTA	Leu
ATG	Met	GTG	Val	TTG	Leu	CTG	Leu
ATT	Ile	GTT	Val	TTT	Phe	CTT	Leu
ATC	Ile	GTC	Val	TTC	Phe	CTC	Leu
ACA	Thr	GCA	Ala	TCA	Ser	CCA	Pro
ACG	Thr	GCG	Ala	TCG	Ser	CCG	Pro
ACT	Thr	GCT	Ala	TCT	Ser	CCT	Pro
ACC	Thr	GCC	Ala	TCC	Ser	CCC	Pro

The DNA code word GCA corresponds to the amino acid arginine, while the DNA code word TCG corresponds to the amino acid serine. Most amino acids are represented by more than one possible triplet code, but each triplet code yields only one particular amino acid. Three of the DNA code words (TAA, TAG, and TGA) are stop or termination code words. The translation of a DNA base sequence begins with a start code word and runs until a stop code word is reached.

Even with only four different bases, the number of possible nucleotide sequences in a DNA chain is virtually limitless. The particular DNA sequence of an organism constitutes the genetic blueprint for that organism. This genetic blueprint is found in the nucleus of each cell of the organism, and is passed on from parents to offspring. The incredible diversity of life on Earth stems from the differences in the genetic code of every living thing.

Summary

- The particular base sequence of DNA is responsible for the production of all of the different proteins that are present in each and every living thing that has ever inhabited the Earth.
- A gene is a segment of DNA that carries a code for making a specific polypeptide chain.
- The genetic code works as a series of three-letter codes.

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