What is cloning?

The term cloning describes a number of different processes that can be used to produce genetically identical copies of a biological entity. The copied material, which has the same genetic makeup as the original, is referred to as a clone.

Researchers have cloned a wide range of biological materials, including [genes](http://www.genome.gov/Glossary/?id=70), [cells](http://www.genome.gov/Glossary/?id=25), tissues and even entire organisms, such as a sheep.

Do clones ever occur naturally?

Yes. In nature, some plants and single-celled organisms, such as [bacteria](http://www.genome.gov/Glossary/?id=15), produce genetically identical offspring through a process called asexual reproduction. In asexual reproduction, a new individual is generated from a copy of a single cell from the parent organism.

Natural clones, also known as identical twins, occur in humans and other mammals. These twins are produced when a fertilized egg splits, creating two or more embryos that carry almost identical [DNA](http://www.genome.gov/Glossary/?id=48). Identical twins have nearly the same genetic makeup as each other, but they are genetically different from either parent.

What are the types of artificial cloning?

There are three different types of artificial cloning: gene cloning, reproductive cloning and therapeutic cloning.

Gene cloning produces copies of genes or segments of DNA. Reproductive cloning produces copies of whole animals. Therapeutic cloning produces embryonic stem cells for experiments aimed at creating tissues to replace injured or diseased tissues.

Gene cloning, also known as DNA cloning, is a very different process from reproductive and therapeutic cloning. Reproductive and therapeutic cloning share many of the same techniques, but are done for different purposes.

What sort of cloning research is going on at NHGRI?

Gene cloning is the most common type of cloning done by researchers at the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI). NHGRI researchers have not cloned any mammals and NHGRI does not clone humans.

How are genes cloned?

Researchers routinely use cloning techniques to make copies of genes that they wish to study. The procedure consists of inserting a gene from one organism, often referred to as "foreign DNA," into the genetic material of a carrier called a vector. Examples of vectors include bacteria, yeast cells, viruses or plasmids, which are small DNA circles carried by bacteria. After the gene is inserted, the vector is placed in laboratory conditions that prompt it to multiply, resulting in the gene being copied many times over.

How are animals cloned?

In reproductive cloning, researchers remove a mature [somatic cell](http://www.genome.gov/Glossary/?id=186), such as a skin cell, from an animal that they wish to copy. They then transfer the DNA of the donor animal's somatic cell into an egg cell, or oocyte, that has had its own DNA-containing nucleus removed.  
Researchers can add the DNA from the somatic cell to the empty egg in two different ways. In the first method, they remove the DNA-containing nucleus of the somatic cell with a needle and inject it into the empty egg. In the second approach, they use an electrical current to fuse the entire somatic cell with the empty egg.  
In both processes, the egg is allowed to develop into an early-stage embryo in the test-tube and then is implanted into the womb of an adult female animal. Ultimately, the adult female gives birth to an animal that has the same genetic make up as the animal that donated the somatic cell. This young animal is referred to as a clone. Reproductive cloning may require the use of a surrogate mother to allow development of the cloned embryo, as was the case for the most famous cloned organism, Dolly the sheep.

What animals have been cloned?

Over the last 50 years, scientists have conducted cloning experiments in a wide range of animals using a variety of techniques. In 1979, researchers produced the first genetically identical mice by splitting mouse embryos in the test tube and then implanting the resulting embryos into the wombs of adult female mice. Shortly after that, researchers produced the first genetically identical cows, sheep and chickens by transferring the nucleus of a cell taken from an early embryo into an egg that had been emptied of its nucleus.

It was not until 1996, however, that researchers succeeded in cloning the first mammal from a mature (somatic) cell taken from an adult animal. After 276 attempts, Scottish researchers finally produced Dolly, the lamb from the udder cell of a 6-year-old sheep. Two years later, researchers in Japan cloned eight calves from a single cow, but only four survived.

Besides cattle and sheep, other mammals that have been cloned from somatic cells include: cat, deer, dog, horse, mule, ox, rabbit and rat. In addition, a rhesus monkey has been cloned by embryo splitting.

Have humans been cloned?

Despite several highly publicized claims, human cloning still appears to be fiction. There currently is no solid scientific evidence that anyone has cloned human embryos.

In 1998, scientists in South Korea claimed to have successfully cloned a human embryo, but said the experiment was interrupted very early when the clone was just a group of four cells. In 2002, Clonaid, part of a religious group that believes humans were created by extraterrestrials, held a news conference to announce the birth of what it claimed to be the first cloned human, a girl named Eve. However, despite repeated requests by the research community and the news media, Clonaid never provided any evidence to confirm the existence of this clone or the other 12 human clones it purportedly created.

In 2004, a group led by Woo-Suk Hwang of Seoul National University in South Korea published a paper in the journal *Science* in which it claimed to have created a cloned human embryo in a test tube. However, an independent scientific committee later found no proof to support the claim and, in January 2006, *Science* announced that Hwang's paper had been retracted.

From a technical perspective, cloning humans and other primates is more difficult than in other mammals. One reason is that two proteins essential to cell division, known as spindle proteins, are located very close to the chromosomes in primate eggs. Consequently, removal of the egg's nucleus to make room for the donor nucleus also removes the spindle proteins, interfering with cell division. In other mammals, such as cats, rabbits and mice, the two spindle proteins are spread throughout the egg. So, removal of the egg's nucleus does not result in loss of spindle proteins. In addition, some dyes and the ultraviolet light used to remove the egg's nucleus can damage the primate cell and prevent it from growing.

Do cloned animals always look identical?

No. Clones do not always look identical. Although clones share the same genetic material, the environment also plays a big role in how an organism turns out.

For example, the first cat to be cloned, named Cc, is a female calico cat that looks very different from her mother. The explanation for the difference is that the color and pattern of the coats of cats cannot be attributed exclusively to genes. A biological phenomenon involving inactivation of the X chromosome (See [sex chromosome](http://www.genome.gov/Glossary/?id=181)) in every cell of the female cat (which has two X chromosomes) determines which coat color genes are switched off and which are switched on. The distribution of X inactivation, which seems to occur randomly, determines the appearance of the cat's coat.

What are the potential applications of cloned animals?

Reproductive cloning may enable researchers to make copies of animals with the potential benefits for the fields of medicine and agriculture.

For instance, the same Scottish researchers who cloned Dolly have cloned other sheep that have been genetically modified to produce milk that contains a human protein essential for blood clotting. The hope is that someday this protein can be purified from the milk and given to humans whose blood does not clot properly. Another possible use of cloned animals is for testing new drugs and treatment strategies. The great advantage of using cloned animals for drug testing is that they are all genetically identical, which means their responses to the drugs should be uniform rather than variable as seen in animals with different genetic make-ups.

After consulting with many independent scientists and experts in cloning, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) decided in January 2008 that meat and milk from cloned animals, such as cattle, pigs and goats, are as safe as those from non-cloned animals. The FDA action means that researchers are now free to using cloning methods to make copies of animals with desirable agricultural traits, such as high milk production or lean meat. However, because cloning is still very expensive, it will likely take many years until food products from cloned animals actually appear in supermarkets.

Another application is to create clones to build populations of endangered, or possibly even extinct, species of animals. In 2001, researchers produced the first clone of an endangered species: a type of Asian ox known as a guar. Sadly, the baby guar, which had developed inside a surrogate cow mother, died just a few days after its birth. In 2003, another endangered type of ox, called the Banteg, was successfully cloned. Soon after, three African wildcats were cloned using frozen embryos as a source of DNA. Although some experts think cloning can save many species that would otherwise disappear, others argue that cloning produces a population of genetically identical individuals that lack the genetic variability necessary for species survival.

Some people also have expressed interest in having their deceased pets cloned in the hope of getting a similar animal to replace the dead one. But as shown by Cc the cloned cat, a clone may not turn out exactly like the original pet whose DNA was used to make the clone.

What are the potential drawbacks of cloning animals?

Reproductive cloning is a very inefficient technique and most cloned animal embryos cannot develop into healthy individuals. For instance, Dolly was the only clone to be born live out of a total of 277 cloned embryos. This very low efficiency, combined with safety concerns, presents a serious obstacle to the application of reproductive cloning.

Researchers have observed some adverse health effects in sheep and other mammals that have been cloned. These include an increase in birth size and a variety of defects in vital organs, such as the liver, brain and heart. Other consequences include premature aging and problems with the immune system. Another potential problem centers on the relative age of the cloned cell?s chromosomes. As cells go through their normal rounds of division, the tips of the chromosomes, called telomeres, shrink. Over time, the telomeres become so short that the cell can no longer divide and, consequently, the cell dies. This is part of the natural aging process that seems to happen in all cell types. As a consequence, clones created from a cell taken from an adult might have chromosomes that are already shorter than normal, which may condemn the clones' cells to a shorter life span. Indeed, Dolly, who was cloned from the cell of a 6-year-old sheep, had chromosomes that were shorter than those of other sheep her age. Dolly died when she was six years old, about half the average sheep's 12-year lifespan.

What is therapeutic cloning?

Therapeutic cloning involves creating a cloned embryo for the sole purpose of producing embryonic stem cells with the same DNA as the donor cell. These stem cells can be used in experiments aimed at understanding disease and developing new treatments for disease. To date, there is no evidence that human embryos have been produced for therapeutic cloning.

The richest source of embryonic stem cells is tissue formed during the first five days after the egg has started to divide. At this stage of development, called the blastocyst, the embryo consists of a cluster of about 100 cells that can become any cell type. Stem cells are harvested from cloned embryos at this stage of development, resulting in destruction of the embryo while it is still in the test tube.

What are the potential applications of therapeutic cloning?

Researchers hope to use embryonic stem cells, which have the unique ability to generate virtually all types of cells in an organism, to grow healthy tissues in the laboratory that can be used replace injured or diseased tissues. In addition, it may be possible to learn more about the molecular causes of disease by studying embryonic stem cell lines from cloned embryos derived from the cells of animals or humans with different diseases. Finally, differentiated tissues derived from ES cells are excellent tools to test new therapeutic drugs.

What are the potential drawbacks of therapeutic cloning?

Many researchers think it is worthwhile to explore the use of embryonic stem cells as a path for treating human diseases. However, some experts are concerned about the striking similarities between stem cells and cancer cells. Both cell types have the ability to proliferate indefinitely and some studies show that after 60 cycles of cell division, stem cells can accumulate mutations that could lead to cancer. Therefore, the relationship between stem cells and cancer cells needs to be more clearly understood if stem cells are to be used to treat human disease.

What are some of the ethical issues related to cloning?

Gene cloning is a carefully regulated technique that is largely accepted today and used routinely in many labs worldwide. However, both reproductive and therapeutic cloning raise important ethical issues, especially as related to the potential use of these techniques in humans.

Reproductive cloning would present the potential of creating a human that is genetically identical to another person who has previously existed or who still exists. This may conflict with long-standing religious and societal values about human dignity, possibly infringing upon principles of individual freedom, identity and autonomy. However, some argue that reproductive cloning could help sterile couples fulfill their dream of parenthood. Others see human cloning as a way to avoid passing on a deleterious gene that runs in the family without having to undergo embryo screening or embryo selection.

Therapeutic cloning, while offering the potential for treating humans suffering from disease or injury, would require the destruction of human embryos in the test tube. Consequently, opponents argue that using this technique to collect embryonic stem cells is wrong, regardless of whether such cells are used to benefit sick or injured people.