

Text 2

Superbug, super-fast evolution [excerpt]

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Fascination with tiny microbes bearing long, difficult-to-pronounce names is often reserved for biology classrooms — unless of course the bug in question threatens human health. MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) now contributes to more US deaths than does HIV, and as its threat level has risen, so has the attention lavished on it by the media. At this point, almost any move the bug makes is likely to show up in your local paper. Last month saw reporting on studies of hospital screening for MRSA (which came up with conflicting results), stories on MRSA outbreaks (involving both real and false alarms), and media flurries over the finding that humans and their pets can share the infection with one another. Why is this bug so frightening? The answer is an evolutionary one.

Where's the evolution?

MRSA is resistant not only to the antibiotic methicillin, but also to whole other suites of our drugs, making it very difficult to treat and, occasionally, deadly. Modern strains of MRSA did not, however, show up out of the blue. In the early 1940s, when penicillin was first used to treat bacterial infections, penicillin-resistant strains of *S. aureus* were unknown — but by the 1950s, they were common in hospitals. Methicillin was introduced in 1961 to treat these resistant strains, and within one year, doctors had encountered methicillin-resistant *S. aureus*. Today, we have strains of MRSA that simultaneously resist a laundry list of different antibiotics, including vancomycin — often considered our last line of antibacterial defense.

How did *S. aureus* morph from a minor skin infection to a terror? When the media report on MRSA and other drug resistant pathogens, they often say that such pathogens have recently “emerged” — that they’ve “developed” resistance or “learned” to evade our drugs. In fact, it’s more accurate to say that these bugs have *evolved* resistance. It’s particularly ironic that newspapers might shy away from describing bacterial evolution as such because, when it comes to evolution, bacteria have most of the rest of us beat.

Source: “Battling bacterial evolution: The work of Carl Bergstrom.” Understanding Evolution. University of California Museum of Paleontology, 7 November 2011 http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/news/080401_mrsa.