

Beard Microbiology: Grubby Hipsters May Be On to Something



By Lila Abassi — February 13, 2016



hipster beard via [shutterstock](#) [1]

If you're a pogonophobe, or someone who fears beards, like me, then you can imagine my compounded revulsion when I learned that the dreaded hipster beard is no cleaner than the bathroom floor.

So it is not easy to defend them, but it may be that these hirsute millennials are getting a bad rap. Those beards may be a defense against MSRA, the dreaded Superbugs.

Catchy headlines, such as the one in the [New York Post](#) [2] last year claiming that, Bearded Men Have Poop on Their Faces, were based on research done by a microbiologist John Golobic, of Quest Diagnostics in New Mexico. But it may simply be what the [Washington Post](#) [3] referred to as bacterial fear mongering (and if there's one thing we don't like here at the American Council on Science and Health, it's fear mongering). Why urge caution about mandating freshly-shorn faces? If bacteria exist in beards, they are equally likely to exist elsewhere on our bodies, and are no more likely to cause disease they are [commensal](#) [4].

A [study](#) [5] a few years ago examined 408 male (hopefully male) hospital workers, with and without facial hair, who were checked for nosocomial, or hospital-acquired, pathogens found that workers with facial hair were less likely to be colonized with methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) a common and potentially deadly bacteria.

As part of an experiment performed on the [British show](#) [6], Trust Me I'm a Doctor, the hosts swabbed the beards of 20 random fellows on the streets of London and sent off the samples to a microbiologist, Dr. Adam Roberts, a microbiologist at University College London.

When the samples were inoculated on petri dishes with an indicator strain of bacteria, Dr. Adams observed that in some petri dishes *something was killing the indicator bacteria (Escherichia coli)*

obviously the microbe with which they were co-inoculated. The hypothesis is that in the environment of the beard, microbes have to compete with each other for survival and they evolve and develop mechanisms to succeed in doing so.

Dr. Adams identified the murderous bacteria to be *Staphylococcus epidermidis*, and it worked even against drug resistant *E. coli*. In addition to this, from samples that were submitted by the general public, Dr. Adams found some beard bacteria to contain anti-adhesion molecules that prevent bacterial binding to surfaces.

Read that again. Even if you hate beards, this has tremendous clinical implications.

While I was hoping that there would be another reason to end to the facial desecration fad, science trumps my ick factor. Finding bacteria capable of kicking drug-resistant bacteria in the unmentionables, well, that's enough to make me at least tolerate beards.

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[2] <http://nypost.com/2015/05/04/science-proves-that-beards-contain-fecal-matter/>

[3] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2015/05/04/no-your-beard-isnt-full-of-poop-probably/>

[4] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commensalism>

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[6] <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35350886>