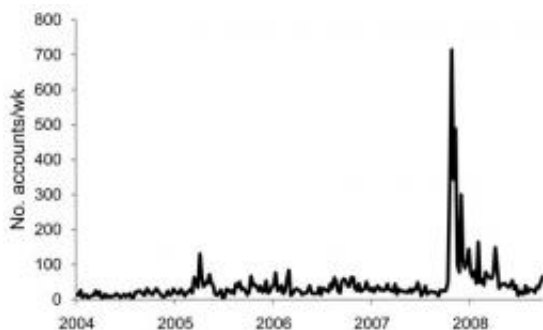


# MRSA spread could be tracked through Google search patterns

May 23 2011, by Deborah Braconnier

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Weekly counts of news coverage (newspaper stories, wire service stories, and television and radio news transcripts) that mention "MRSA" (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) or "staph," 2004-2008. Extracted from the LexisNexis Academic Database. Image: [i]Emerging Infectious Diseases[/i], Volume 17, Number 6-June 2011.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Google searches are apparently providing much more important information than just a typical search for a local restaurant or research for a term paper. Google trends are also providing much more information than just the 'top celebrity gossip' and news searches. According to a paper published in the June issue of *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, epidemiologist Diane Lauderdale of the University of Chicago show how Google searches and trends could be used to better track the spread of methicillin-resistant *staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA.

MRSA causes a drug-resistant staph infection which was originally seen

in hospitals and became widespread in the 1980s. In the 1990s, a community strain emerged and began affecting healthy people outside of hospitals, with a large infection spreading in 2005 that has been linked to the death of 18,650 Americans as reported by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in 2007.

The researchers examined Google searches for the terms ‘MRSA’ and ‘staph’ between 2004 and 2008 and compared the search numbers with actual MRSA related hospital records. Researchers also looked at news reports throughout 2004-2008 where [MRSA](#) was mentioned, as they hypothesized that the coverage would cause an increase in searches. However, besides a spike in 2007 after the CDC announced its 2005 outbreak report, the number of searches tracked with the number of cases, and did not show increases when news coverage increased. To the researchers, this suggests that the search patterns in Google may be a reliable indicator of infections.

This would not be the first time [Google Trends](#) and searches were used as an indicator when it came to a medical outbreak. [Google Flu Trends](#) is used as a potential early indicator of flu entering an area and was brought into the spotlight during the 2009 swine flu outbreak.

**More information:** Internet Queries and Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus Surveillance, *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, Volume 17, Number 6–June 2011.

[www.cdc.gov/eid/content/17/6/1068.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/eid/content/17/6/1068.htm)

### **Abstract**

The Internet is a common source of medical information and has created novel surveillance opportunities. We assessed the potential for Internet-based surveillance of methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus and examined the extent to which it reflects trends in hospitalizations and news coverage. Google queries were a useful predictor of

hospitalizations for methicillin-resistant *S. aureus* infections.

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