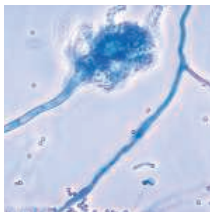


## INFECTIOUS DISEASES

## Farm Fungicides Linked to Resistance in a Human Pathogen

A team of Dutch researchers has reignited a debate on the agricultural use of fungicides with a review in the December issue of *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*. The authors maintain that the massive use of fungicides to protect European orchards, vineyards, and grain fields may be contributing to resistance against drugs used to treat people with life-threatening infections of *Aspergillus fumigatus*. Although the overuse of antibiotics in animal husbandry is known to have caused resistance in the



**Deadly mold.** Invasive *Aspergillus fumigatus* infections can be fatal.

human population, this would be the first time a similar link is found between farm use of fungicides and human health. If true, the authors warn ominously, that “confronts us with a major challenge with worldwide dimensions.” But Herbert Hof, director of the Institute for Medical Microbiology at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, accuses them of crying wolf, saying the paper amounts to “publicity seeking” by frightening the public “in the way horror films do.” The group does have its supporters, however. David Denning of the University of Manchester, who heads the United Kingdom’s National Aspergillosis Centre, says “they have a very strong case.” The leader of the team, Paul Verweij of Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre in the Netherlands, concedes that they haven’t yet clinched the case, but he says enough evidence has accumulated to issue a warning.

**Farmers’ friend.** Azoles are used to protect a wide variety of crops from fungi.

*A. fumigatus* causes infections, sometimes fatal, primarily in people with compromised immune systems and certain diseases, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Patients are thought to become infected when they inhale spores of the fungus, which are ubiquitous in soil. Drugs of a class called azoles are doctors’ mainstay, and resistance has long been known to crop up in individual patients. The mutations in the fungus that cause the resistance usually differ from one patient to the next; in a paper published in July, for instance, Denning’s team reported finding 18 different mutations in an *Aspergillus* gene called *cyp51A* in 30 patients in the United Kingdom.

But Verweij’s team has found something strange in resistant *Aspergillus* strains in the Netherlands: In 94% of the isolates from his own hospital and 69% of those from other Dutch hospitals, the resistance was caused by a single pair of mutations—a point mutation in *cyp51A* and a so-called tandem repeat in the gene’s promoter. To Verweij, that similarity points to a new scenario: that all the patients breathed in spores that were already resistant. That’s why he believes there’s an environmental cause.

Azoles are used to ward off a range of plant pathogens and are applied on 50% of Europe’s grain and grape acreage, says plant pathologist Gert Kema of Wageningen University in the Netherlands, a co-author of the paper. Much smaller amounts are used in the United States, where farming is less-intensive and spraying is less cost-effective. But the compounds are popular in other parts of the world as well, he says.

The risk that heavy agricultural use of azoles might lead to resistance problems in people has been debated for years. In 2002, an expert panel for the European Commission concluded that it was unlikely. But since then, the evidence has been building, Verweij says. The resistant fungus found in patients is also resistant to certain agricultural fungicides, which is suggestive of a link. And in a paper published in June, his group showed that resistant *Aspergillus* could be isolated from soil in flower beds close to hospitals and in commercial compost, leaves, and seeds bought at a garden center. Thirteen of 15 of these environmental samples also had the two mutations seen in clinical isolates.

In an e-mail to *Science*, Hof called the authors “prejudiced” and said resistance in fungi is unlikely to become a major public health problem because unlike bacteria, fungi don’t swap resistance genes. Dominique Sanglard of the University Hospital in Lausanne, Switzerland, on the other hand, says the Dutch researchers seem to be on to something real, although many questions remain. A key step is to show that one or more of the azole fungicides—at least 30 of them are on the market—can actually trigger the mutations in *A. fumigatus* seen in hospitals, says Verweij; that study is already under way.

And what if the link is proven? Verweij says a ban on certain fungicides could be an option. The team has been talking to several fungicide producers, and “they aren’t very keen on studying this further,” he says. A spokesperson for Syngenta, a major azole fungicide producer, says that resistance may have arisen in other ways—such as azole use in cosmetics—and that the company is “not convinced” of a causal link.

—MARTIN ENSERINK

