



2 Emerging Fungal Infections: from the Fields to the Clinic, Resistant 3 *Aspergillus fumigatus* and Dermatophyte Species: a One Health 4 Perspective on an Urgent Public Health Problem

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8 Abstract

9 **Purpose of Review** For this review, we use a One Health approach to examine two globally emerging public health threats
10 related to antifungal drug resistance: triazole-resistant *Aspergillus fumigatus* infections, which can cause a life-threatening
11 illness in immunocompromised hosts, and antifungal-resistant dermatophytosis, which is an aggressive skin infection caused
12 by dermatophyte molds. We describe the state of current scientific knowledge and outline necessary public health actions
13 to address each issue.

14 **Recent Findings** Recent evidence has identified the agricultural use of triazole fungicides as an important driver of triazole-
15 resistant *A. fumigatus* infections. Antifungal-resistant dermatophyte infections are likely driven by the inappropriate use of
16 antifungal drugs and antibacterial and corticosteroid creams.

17 **Summary** This review highlights the need for a One Health approach to address emerging antifungal resistant infections,
18 emphasizing judicious antifungal use to preserve available treatments; strengthened laboratory capacity to identify antifungal
19 resistance; and improved human, animal, and environmental surveillance to detect emerging resistance, monitor trends, and
20 evaluate the effectiveness of efforts to decrease spread.

21 **Keywords** *Aspergillus fumigatus* · Dermatophytosis · One Health · Antifungal resistance

22 Introduction

23 Fungi are a kingdom of eukaryotic organisms found through-
24 out the environment. Pathogenic fungi cause fungal infec-
25 tions that impose a substantial burden on the health of
26 humans, animals, and plants [1, 2, 3••, 4]. Approximately
27 1.5–2 million human deaths from fungi occur globally each
28 year [5]. Fungal infections also have a substantial impact on
29 animal species, triggering extinction events and biodiversity
30 loss in wildlife [6]. The estimated annual economic burden
31 of fungal infections in the USA exceeds \$7.2 billion in direct
32

costs [7], and 20% of the global annual perennial crop losses
are caused by fungal diseases [8].

Antifungal compounds play an essential role in protect-
ing human, animal, and plant health from fungal diseases.
In humans and animals, antifungal drugs treat infections
such as aspergillosis and histoplasmosis; in plants, anti-
fungal compounds help control a variety of diseases [4].
Unfortunately, the development and approval processes for
antifungal drugs are challenging and slow paced. The first
antifungals used in the medical field were discovered in the
1950s [8]; triazole agricultural fungicides entered the market
in the 1970s, and clinical triazole drugs in the 1980s [9].
Currently, only six classes of drugs are approved to treat
fungal infections (just three of which are for invasive fun-
gal disease): polyenes, azoles, echinocandins, allylamines
(e.g., terbinafine), the pyrimidine analog flucytosine, and
the recently developed triterpenoid, ibrexafungerp [5, 10]. A
greater number of antifungal compounds exist to treat plant
mycoses compared with the number of compounds licensed
to treat human and animal infections [8], highlighting the
markedly limited antifungal drug arsenal for human disease.

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The emergence of antifungal drug resistance is a major public health concern, spanning the healthcare, veterinary, and agricultural sectors. The One Health public health approach recognizes the interconnectedness of human, animal, plant, and environmental health; this approach increases the likelihood of understanding and successfully addressing the multifactorial causes of fungal diseases and antimicrobial resistance. For this review, we use a One Health lens to examine two emerging public health threats related to antifungal drug resistance: triazole-resistant *Aspergillus fumigatus* infections and antifungal-resistant dermatophytosis (commonly known as ringworm or tinea). For these public health threats, we describe the state of current scientific knowledge and outline necessary public health actions.

Environmental Origins: the Case of Triazole-Resistant *Aspergillus fumigatus*

A. fumigatus is a globally distributed saprophytic mold found in soil, compost, and air. An opportunistic pathogen of humans and animals [11, 12, 13], *A. fumigatus* is the leading cause of invasive aspergillosis (IA), a life-threatening infection in immunocompromised persons responsible for > 14,000 annual hospitalizations in the USA [7]. *A. fumigatus* also causes bronchopneumonia, sino-nasal aspergillosis, invasive pulmonary aspergillosis, and *Aspergillus* otitis in animal species such as cats, dogs, birds, and horses [14, 15, 16, 17, 18]. In captive penguins, aspergillosis is the most common cause of death [17]. At-risk persons and animals acquire IA by inhaling fungal spores from the environment [19], though a study in horses suggests other routes of infection, such as mycotic invasion from the gut, are also possible [20]. IA generally affects persons with conditions that weaken the immune system, such as cancer, solid organ or stem cell transplantation, advanced HIV disease, and critical illness; in particular, severe COVID-19 has emerged as an important risk factor for IA [21]. Predisposing factors in animals are similar, with severe immunosuppression associated with fatal infections, and invasive disease causing visceral necrotic and granulomatous inflammation [17, 22]. The global incidence of aspergillosis in humans has been steadily rising, likely because of medical advancements leading to longer lifespans for immunocompromised persons [19], the recent COVID-19 pandemic [23, 24], and greater disease detection [25].

Triazole antifungal drugs for treating IA (i.e., voriconazole, posaconazole, isavuconazole, itraconazole), introduced during the 2000s and 2010s, are the first line treatment for IA [13]. However, triazole-resistant *A. fumigatus* threatens successful treatment with these lifesaving drugs [26]. *A. fumigatus* is intrinsically resistant to fluconazole and ketoconazole, further constraining treatment options

[27]. Patients with triazole-resistant IA have a mortality rate of approximately 60%, about twice the mortality observed among patients with triazole-susceptible infections [28]. Triazole-resistant *A. fumigatus* infections have been documented worldwide; the prevalence of aspergillosis cases involving triazole resistance is 20% in certain European healthcare settings [29]. In the USA, triazole-resistant *A. fumigatus* has been infrequently reported. However, low case numbers likely reflect a lack of adequate antifungal susceptibility testing capacity and disease surveillance rather than a true absence of disease [30, 31]. Although data are limited, triazole-resistant *A. fumigatus* has been isolated from animals, including birds and a bottlenose dolphin [32, 33, 34, 35].

A growing body of evidence has identified the agricultural use of triazole fungicides as an important driver of triazole-resistant infections in humans [36, 37, 38]. Triazole fungicides are applied in various agricultural settings to treat fungal infections, prevent crop loss, and improve agricultural yield [39]. Although *A. fumigatus* itself is not a plant pathogen, it is present throughout agricultural settings and can develop resistance to medically important triazole drugs when the fungus is incidentally exposed to triazole fungicides. *A. fumigatus* strains that develop resistance in this manner harbor unique *CYP51A* gene mutations such as TR₃₄/L98H that can confer pan-triazole-resistant infections in patients [30]. *A. fumigatus* clinical isolates with triazole-resistant genotypes have been found to have near-identical genotypes as those of environmental isolates that became resistant due to fungicide exposure, confirming that humans can become infected with *A. fumigatus* strains that originally developed resistance from fungicides used in the environment [36]. *A. fumigatus* can also develop triazole resistance within patients who have had repeated exposure to antifungal drug therapy for chronic aspergillosis. Of note, triazole use in US hospitals has generally been in decline [40]. In contrast, US triazole fungicide use quadrupled in the decade from 2006 to 2016 [41].

The global emergence of triazole-resistant *A. fumigatus* in the setting of increasing use of triazole fungicides poses an alarming public health concern. Emphasis on antifungal stewardship is urgently needed in the human medicine, veterinary, and agricultural sectors to preserve the availability of current antifungal compounds. The judicious use of triazole fungicides is not only an important concern from the human and animal health perspective, but also critical to prevent the emergence of fungicide resistant plant pathogens [42]. In addition to actions and policies that promote antifungal stewardship, improved clinical and environmental surveillance, paired with increased clinical capacity to detect antifungal resistant *A. fumigatus*, are needed to identify emerging pockets of resistance, monitor trends, and evaluate the impact of interventions aimed at curbing the

156 spread of resistance. Additional research, using a One Health
157 approach, is also needed to evaluate strategies to reduce the
158 impact of triazole fungicide use on promotion of triazole-
159 resistant *A. fumigatus* in the environment and ultimately in
160 animals and humans.

161 **Easy Access: the Bane and Boon of Creams** 162 **and Terbinafine**

163 Dermatophytosis, commonly known as ringworm or tinea,
164 is a contagious fungal infection of the skin, hair, and nails,
165 affecting an estimated 20–25% of the global population
166 [43]. Transmission of dermatophyte infections can occur by
167 fomites, by direct contact between humans, or by spread
168 among humans and animals [44]. In veterinary medicine,
169 dermatophytosis is a common superficial fungal infection,
170 contributing to adverse economic outcomes in production
171 animals [45, 46, 47]. Though not generally considered life
172 threatening, dermatophytosis can cause intense discomfort,
173 severe immune reactions, and secondary bacterial infections
174 in certain patient populations, both human and animal [48,
175 49, 50].

176 Antifungal drugs provide critical relief for humans and
177 animals with dermatophytosis, but the emergence of infec-
178 tions resistant to terbinafine (the primary treatment for many
179 types of dermatophyte infections) and other antifungal drugs
180 is a growing public health threat. One of the first reported
181 cases of an infection with a terbinafine-resistant *Trichophy-*
182 *ton rubrum*, a species of dermatophyte, occurred in 2003 in
183 a US patient with tinea unguium (dermatophytosis of the
184 nail) [51]. Since then, the global incidence of antifungal
185 resistant dermatophytosis has risen at an alarming pace,
186 affecting both animals and humans [52, 53, 54]. In India,
187 cases of resistant dermatophytosis have reached epidemic
188 proportions [55••]. *Trichophyton indotineae* (also referred to
189 as *Trichophyton mentagrophytes* type VIII), a dermatophyte
190 frequently exhibiting resistance to terbinafine and triazoles,
191 is the most commonly isolated dermatophyte, with 76% of
192 isolates from northern Indian regions exhibiting terbinafine
193 resistance [55••]. Infections from this organism can be
194 devastating, persisting for years [55••] and spreading eas-
195 ily among household members [49]. In Europe, reports of
196 difficult-to-treat *T. indotineae* infections are increasing [53,
197 54, 56•]. Resistant dermatophyte strains have been identi-
198 fied across the globe [53, 56•, 57], including in the USA
199 and Canada, although the extent of the problem is currently
200 unclear because diagnostic testing, particularly antifungal
201 susceptibility testing for dermatophytes, is rarely performed
202 [58, 60, 61].

203 The drivers of emerging dermatophyte resistance are still
204 being investigated, but inappropriate use of antifungal drugs
205 (both oral and topical) and powerful corticosteroid creams

206 in human medicine is likely important contributors. Over-
207 the-counter (OTC) antifungal drugs are widely available,
208 potentially allowing patients to self-diagnose and overuse
209 OTC treatments; a recent Indian study found that 81% of
210 dermatophytosis patients reported at-home pharmaceutical
211 treatment before seeking care from a health professional
212 [55••]. Patients reported self-prescribed use of OTC drugs,
213 including oral antifungals and topical creams containing
214 varying combinations of steroids, antifungals, or antibiot-
215 ics, a practice that can promote antifungal resistance [55••].
216 However, self-treatment is unlikely to be the sole contribu-
217 tor to dermatophyte resistance. Inaccurate diagnoses and
218 low rates of diagnostic testing performed by clinicians can
219 lead to unnecessary antifungal treatments, which, along
220 with patient noncompliance to treatment guidelines, might
221 contribute to antifungal resistance. Given that up to 50% of
222 antifungal compounds in human medicine might be inappro-
223 priately prescribed [62], there is an urgent need for improved
224 antifungal stewardship practices. Likewise, in veterinary
225 medicine, antifungal treatments are often chosen based on
226 financial and specific patient considerations rather than anti-
227 fungal susceptibility testing results. With recommendations
228 that all cats or dogs presenting with dermatophytosis (most
229 commonly caused by *Microsporum canis*) receive treatment,
230 the lack of susceptibility testing and zoonotic potential of *M.*
231 *canis* is concerning [48]. These considerations underscore
232 the need for antifungal stewardship in both human and ani-
233 mal medicines.

234 Corticosteroid creams, some of which are highly potent,
235 are easily accessible as OTC drugs but are often not used
236 appropriately. While high-potency OTC corticosteroid
237 creams can help relieve symptoms, these medicines do not
238 treat the underlying fungal infection and can actually exac-
239 erbate infections [63, 64]. The resulting localized immune
240 suppression can lead to severe recalcitrant infections and
241 abnormal clinical presentations [64, 65]. Combination cor-
242 ticosteroid-antifungal creams further complicate treatment.
243 When symptom relief from use of these creams occurs,
244 patients might prematurely discontinue use, exposing der-
245 matophytes to inadequate antifungal drug (e.g., terbinafine)
246 concentrations and potentially promoting the development
247 of resistance [64].

248 Several key actions are needed to address the emergence
249 of resistant dermatophytosis. Educational efforts and poli-
250 cies should focus on improving the appropriate diagnostic
251 testing and treatment of dermatophytosis in humans and ani-
252 mals, with an emphasis on judicious antifungal use to pre-
253 serve available treatment options. Increased clinician aware-
254 ness of resistant dermatophytosis and access to antifungal
255 susceptibility testing will be important to curbing the spread
256 of resistance. Patients, too, should be educated on the need
257 for proper adherence to prescribed antifungal therapies and
258 the importance of seeking a clinical diagnosis rather than

259 relying on the empiric use of potentially harmful over-the-
 260 counter remedies. Finally, additional research is needed to
 261 further characterize the epidemiology of antifungal resistant
 262 dermatophyte infections, with a focus on quantifying the
 263 overall burden of disease and identifying potential drivers of
 264 infection. This research is needed to inform policies aimed
 265 at improving antifungal stewardship and curbing the spread
 266 of antifungal resistant dermatophyte infections.

267 Conclusion

268 The global emergence of triazole-resistant *A. fumigatus* and
 269 antifungal resistant dermatophytosis represents two urgent
 270 public health threats, each requiring a One Health approach.
 271 The scope of emerging antifungal resistance and its potential
 272 impact on society extends beyond the two issues discussed
 273 in this report. Incidence is increasing of infections caused by
 274 drug resistant molds (e.g., lomentosporiosis, scedosporiosis)
 275 [66] and other fungi, including yeasts such as *Candida auris*
 276 [67] and the fungus *Sporothrix brasilienses*, which can be
 277 transmitted from cats to humans [68]. In summary, a cross-
 278 sector (human medicine, veterinary medicine, agriculture)
 279 emphasis is needed on antifungal stewardship, clinician,
 280 industry and public awareness, and increased laboratory
 281 capacity to detect and monitor antifungal drug resistance in
 282 humans, animals, and the environment.
 283

284 Declarations

285 **Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

286 **Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent** This article does not
 287 contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any
 288 of the authors.

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 291 been highlighted as:

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