

Title	Microbiome and skin biology
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Publication date	2019-08-01
Original Citation	Lunjani, N., Hlela, C. and O'Mahony, L. (2019) 'Microbiome and skin biology', Current Opinion in Allergy and Clinical Immunology, 19(4), pp. 328-333. doi: 10.1097/aci.0000000000000542
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	<a href="https://journals.lww.com/co-allergy/Fulltext/2019/08000/Microbiome_and_skin_biology.10.aspx">https://journals.lww.com/co-allergy/Fulltext/2019/08000/Microbiome_and_skin_biology.10.aspx</a> - 10.1097/aci.0000000000000542
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Download date	2025-07-31 02:56:32
Item downloaded from	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10468/8293">https://hdl.handle.net/10468/8293</a>

1 Microbiome and Skin Biology

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13   **Abstract:**

14   *Purpose of review:* The skin is home to a diverse milieu of bacteria, fungi, viruses,  
15   bacteriophages and archaeal communities. The application of culture independent approaches  
16   has revolutionized the characterization of the skin microbiome and have revealed a  
17   previously under-appreciated phylogenetic and functional granularity of skin-associated  
18   microbes in both health and disease states.

19   *Recent findings:* The physiology of a given skin niche drives the site-specific differences in  
20   bacterial phyla composition of healthy skin. Changes in the skin microbiome have  
21   consistently been associated with atopic dermatitis (AD). In particular, *Staphylococcus*  
22   *aureus* overgrowth with concomitant decline in *S. epidermidis* is a general feature associated  
23   with AD and is not restricted to eczematous lesions. Changes in fungal species are now also  
24   being described. Changes in the composition and metabolic activity of the gut microbiota are  
25   associated with skin health.

26   *Summary:* We are now beginning to appreciate the intimate and intricate interactions between  
27   microbes and skin health. Multiple studies are currently focussed on the manipulation of the  
28   skin or gut microbiome to explore their therapeutic potential in the prevention and treatment  
29   of skin inflammation.

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31   *Keywords:* Microbiome, Atopic dermatitis, *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Malassezia*.

## Introduction

An enormous variety of microbes colonize all internal and external body surfaces. These microbes are organized within complex community structures, utilizing nutrients from other microbes, host secretions and the diet. The microbiome is defined as the sum of these microbes, their genomic elements and interactions in a given ecological niche. In addition to bacteria, fungi, viruses and bacteriophages are also considered to be important components of the microbiome. The composition and metabolism of the microbiome is dependent on the specific body site examined, resulting in a series of unique habitats within and between individuals that can change substantially over time [1]. This presents significant challenges to the local immune system, which should tolerate the presence of these microbes to avoid damaging host tissue while retaining the ability to respond appropriately to invasive pathogens. The mechanisms that mediate host-microbe communication are highly sophisticated and need to be constantly coordinated [2]. Indeed, disrupted communication between the microbiome and the host due to altered microbiome composition and/or metabolism is thought to negatively influence immune homeostatic networks and may play a role in immune hypersensitivity to environmental exposures, such as allergens [3, 4, 5].

Relatively recently, epidemiological studies have identified associations between the migration from traditional farming to urban environments, changes in dietary practices, lack of contact with animals, use of antibiotics, lifestyle factors and reduced exposure to biodiverse environments with changes in the composition of the human microbiome and the increased incidence of allergic, inflammatory, metabolic and neuropsychiatric disorders [6\*, 7\*, 8\*, 9\*, 10\*, 11\*]. In particular, early life events have been shown to be significant modifiers of microbial establishment, colonization, development and maturation. These include mode of delivery, breastfeeding, mother's diet and health status, antibiotics and other drug usage in pregnancy and early childhood, early-life environment (i.e. number of siblings,

pets at home, proximity to farm animals and green areas) [12\*, 13, 14\*, 15\*, 16\*, 17, 18]. In this review, we will highlight some of the recent advances in our knowledge regarding the influence of the microbiome on skin biology, skin immune reactivity and skin diseases such as atopic dermatitis (AD). In addition, we will discuss the potential translation and challenges associated with microbial-based therapies for the skin.

### **Skin as a Unique Microbial Habitat**

The skin is the most exposed organ, serving as an interface shielding underlying structures against external aggressions. Though open to colonization from the environment, human skin serves as a strong selective filter, largely unsuitable for most microbes to permanently reside [19]. At the forefront is the highly keratinized epidermis, the result of a specialized differentiation process of keratinocytes (the main cell type in the epidermal barrier) interspersed between intercellular lipids, a collection of ceramides, cholesterol and various fatty acids. Recent studies have shown that the uppermost layer of the epidermis, the stratum corneum (SC), harbours a rich diversity of microbes [20\*] contributing to the barrier properties of the skin. An aqueous and lipid layer, which is present above the epidermis, also contribute to the ecology of the surface. Below the epidermis are several layers that form part of the skin barrier, profoundly affecting function and also harbouring microbes [21]. A growing body of data suggests that cutaneous microbes can influence the structure and function of healthy skin without penetrating the epidermis [22]. Contributing to the microenvironment is the presence and function of additional skin appendages, including sweat glands, hair follicles, sebaceous glands and the dermal layers which in turn drives the site-specific differences in bacterial phyla composition of healthy skin [21, 23, 24]. Eccrine sweat (water, salt and electrolytes) is secreted directly onto the skin surface, which works to

acidify the skin, creating an environment that plays a major role in limiting the composition of microbes that can survive and proliferate.

*Propionibacteria*, *Corynebacteria* and *Staphylococci* make up the most abundant bacteria species on the skin. *Staphylococcal* species are found in moist skin niches, and are halotolerant organisms that have evolved to use urea found in sweat as a nitrogen source. Certain *Staphylococcus* species, e.g. *S. aureus*, are able to produce adhesins that promote bacterial adherence to skin and produce proteases that release nutrients from the SC [25\*\*]. These sweat glands constitutively express several antimicrobial peptides (AMPs), including cathelicidin and  $\beta$ -defensins. The density of eccrine sweat glands impacts the microbial colonization of the skin [26]. Sebaceous glands are connected to hair follicles, forming the pilosebaceous unit. Sebaceous glands secrete lipid-rich sebum, which lubricates the hair and skin. The breakdown of sebum generates free fatty acids, which work to control microbial colonization, along with sebocyte-derived cathelicidin,  $\beta$ -defensins and antimicrobial histones. However, organisms such as *Propionibacteria acnes*, a facultative anaerobe, are able to flourish in the anoxic sebaceous gland as they can produce proteases and lipases that release amino acids and free fatty acids (that favors bacterial adherence) from skin and sebum respectively and cause acne vulgaris following their over proliferation in this lipid rich environment [25\*\*]. *Corynebacterium* has adapted to survive in moist sites by utilizing SC and sebaceous lipids to generate breakdown products to coat its cell surface.

Current microbial detection techniques have shown that bacteria are not only present on the skin surface but are also found in deeper layers of the epidermis, and even in the dermis and dermal adipose tissue. Recent studies have helped define the skin microbiome landscape, indicating that the skin harbours a diverse population of microbes whose composition is largely determined by site specific physiological factors, such as moisture and sebum content [25\*\*, 27].

## Healthy Skin Microbiome

The development and application of culture independent approaches (such as metagenome shotgun sequencing) have revolutionized the characterization of the skin microbiome and have revealed a previously under-appreciated phylogenetic and functional granularity of skin-associated microbes in both health and disease states. Despite the harsh nutrient-poor landscape, healthy human skin is home to a heterogeneous milieu of commensal microorganisms including bacteria, fungi, viruses, bacteriophages and archaeal communities [27]. Multiple factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, climate, UV exposure and lifestyle shape the composition of the healthy skin microbiome. It has also been observed that the adult skin microbiome can remain stable over a period of at least 2 years irrespective of environmental changes [28]. The initial colonization of the newborn baby however depends on many factors, including the delivery mode. With vaginal delivery there is acquisition of maternal vaginal bacterial flora, and with caesarean section acquisition of skin-associated microorganisms. Postnatally, the immature immune system allows microbial colonization in the absence of inflammatory responses. This tolerogenic environment can be attributed to the infiltration of neonatal skin by regulatory T cells. Thereafter different commensals educate distinct aspects of the host immune system in order to respond appropriately to future exposure to pathogens. During puberty, the skin microbiome composition shifts in favor of lipophilic skin organisms [29, 30]. The continuous molecular cross-talk between cutaneous epithelia, tissue resident innate and adaptive immune cells and skin-associated microbes allows the establishment of commensal partners, which have essential roles in protection from invasive pathogens, educating distinct aspects of the host immune system to respond appropriately to future exposure to pathogens, the breakdown of skin-derived lipids and metabolites, and maintenance of immune homeostatic networks [25\*\*]. Interactions between

skin microorganisms may be synergistic or competitive. These interactions may be exploited to identify mechanisms by which commensal microorganisms mediate direct and indirect colonization resistance in the skin.

Whilst skin bacterial microorganisms are the most abundant at the kingdom level, fungi are the least abundant. Within the skin mycobiome, lipophilic *Malassezia* species represent the most predominant fungal flora on the human skin. They are unable to synthesize their own nutrients and therefore produce lipid-utilizing enzymes in order to exploit the lipid-rich environment of the skin. Currently, there are relatively few skin-associated fungal sequenced reference genomes available, which will need to be improved to facilitate future mechanistic assessments on the skin mycobiome. Little is currently known concerning the spectrum of viral and bacteriophage communities present on healthy skin or their interactions with the microbiome and host cells but may be of significant relevance to conditions such as AD complicated by eczema herpeticum and skin cancers associated with oncoviruses.

## **Microbiome Associated with Skin Disorders**

Understanding site-specific differences in microbial composition advances our understanding of diseases such as AD, psoriasis and acne vulgaris. The association between AD and an altered skin microbiome is now well documented. *S. aureus* overgrowth is a common feature of AD and is not restricted to eczematous lesions [31\*]. *S. aureus* colonization is evident in 90% of AD cases, associates with AD severity and increased allergen sensitization. AD associated defects in stratum corneum integrity, decreased expression of structural proteins, altered skin lipid composition and skin pH and aberrant cutaneous and systemic immune responses facilitate *S. aureus* overgrowth, whilst *S. aureus*-derived proteases and toxins further damage the skin barrier and induce innate and adaptive



immune responses [32\*\*]. It has also been observed that the *S. aureus* overgrowth is associated with a depletion in commensal Staphylococci such as *S. epidermidis*, and other skin commensal taxa including *Propionibacterium*, *Streptococcus*, *Acinetobacter*, *Corynebacterium*, *Prevotella* and *Proteobacteria*.

While it still needs to be clarified whether *S. aureus* contributes to the initiation of AD or if *S. aureus* blooms as a consequence of the disease, a number of studies do mechanistically link *S. aureus* with skin inflammation. *S. aureus*  $\delta$ -toxin induces the degranulation of mast cells, which promotes innate and adaptive immune responses [33]. *S. aureus*  $\alpha$ -toxin can also induce IL-1 $\beta$  production from monocytes, which may promote Th17 responses, or IL-17 production from CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells [34]. Through the defective skin barrier, *S. aureus* may reach the dermis where it interacts with immune cells and trigger cytokine production including IL-4, IL-13, IL-22 and TSLP [35]. The Th2 inflammatory milieu is further deleterious to the epidermal barrier and can additionally impair tissue production of antimicrobial peptides (AMPs) such as human beta defensins (hBD)-2, hBD-3 and cathelicidin LL-37, thus impairing pathogen clearance.

The role for fungi, such as *Malassezia* species, is increasingly being investigated in AD. *Malassezia* DNA has been detected in 90% of AD skin lesions and colonization increases with disease severity [36]. In addition, different *Malassezia* strains were found in AD and healthy individuals suggesting the existence of key pathogenic strains in AD [37]. It has been shown that *Malassezia* could contribute to AD pathogenesis by secreting immunogenic proteins that induce proinflammatory cytokines, upregulate expression of TLR-2 and TLR-4 on keratinocytes, and induction of auto-reactive T cells [38]. Most recently, it was reported that *Malassezia*-induced Th17 responses are required for antifungal immunity within the skin but might also promote skin inflammation [39\*\*].

*S. aureus*, via its promotion of Th17 polarising responses, has also been shown to be relevant to psoriasis lesions [40\*]. In addition, increased abundance of *Brevibacterium* and *Kocuria palustris* and *Gordonia*, were associated with psoriatic lesions on the back and the elbow, respectively. In the same study, a significantly higher abundance of *Malassezia restricta* was detected on the back, while *Malassezia sympodialis* dominated the elbow mycobiota. In psoriatic elbow skin, there was a significant correlation between the occurrence of *Kocuria*, *Lactobacillus*, and *Streptococcus* with *Saccharomyces*, which was not observed in healthy skin [41\*]. Interestingly, successful treatment with balneotherapy or UVB was associated with a significant change in the lesion-associated microbiome [42, 43\*].

## **Role of Gut Microbes in Skin Disorders**

Early studies demonstrated that patients with AD have lower levels of *Bifidobacterium* in the gut compared to healthy controls and *Bifidobacterium* levels were inversely correlated with AD disease severity [44]. Several studies have since shown that alterations in gut microbiota composition can precede the development of AD. Early gut colonisation with *C. difficile* was associated with AD development and low gut microbiota diversity and specifically low *Bacterioidetes* diversity at 1 month was associated with AD development at 2 years of age [36, 45]. Reduced colonization of mucin-degrading bacteria (*Akkermansia muciniphila*, *Ruminococcus gnavus* and *Lachnospiraceae*) were more recently shown for AD patients, which were associated with alterations in immune development in the AD group compared with the control group [46\*\*]. In addition to modifying the host gut immune system, certain metabolites produced by microbes within the gut can be absorbed and thereby may directly influence the skin. For example, children with the highest levels of faecal short-chain fatty acids such as butyrate at 1 year of age, have a lower risk of

developing AD by 6 years of age [47\*]. Differences in gut taxa and overall gut microbial diversity has also been noted for patients with psoriasis [48\*].

## **Therapeutic Potential of the Microbiome**

Multiple studies are currently focussed on the manipulation of the skin microbiome to explore its therapeutic potential. Transplant of *S. hominis* and *S. epidermidis* strains that secrete antimicrobial peptides was effective in controlling *S. aureus* overgrowth [49]. More recently, emollients supplemented with a *Vitreoscilla filiformis* lysate or topical administration of *Roseomonas mucosa* improved clinical severity scores in adults and children with AD [50\*\*].

In addition to topical bacterial treatments, oral administration of probiotics has also been examined. Prenatal and post-natal treatment with certain *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* strains can reduce risk of AD development in infants, while a mixture of probiotic strains was recently shown to reduce SCORAD index and topical steroid use in children with AD [51\*, 52\*]. These beneficial effects in the skin may be associated with changes in T cell-mediated responses [53, 54]. Little has been reported on the clinical effects of probiotic treatment in patients with psoriasis, but administration of a *B. longum* strain to adults with psoriasis resulted in reduced circulating levels of CRP, TNF and IL-17 [55]. Taken together, supplementation with specific probiotic strains may modulate the gut microbiota in a way that attenuates inflammation within the skin.

## **Conclusions**

We are now beginning to appreciate the intimate and intricate interactions between microbes and skin health. Changes in the skin microbiome are associated with damaged or

inflamed skin, but the exact pathological mechanisms or their therapeutic potential remain largely unknown. Indeed, the role of gut microbes in skin health is a fascinating area of study and reaffirms the existence of a gut-skin axis. In the near future, we expect that analysis of the skin microbiome will assist in the clinical management of skin disorders, including the better identification of disease-related microbial communities or “Dermatypes”, akin to recently described gut enterotypes. It will afford us the possibility of identifying novel treatment modalities and appropriate microbial reconstitution strategies. However, we still need to better understand the influence of host physiological changes and environmental challenges on the microbiota, describe the nonbacterial members of the skin microbiome, improve the resolution of our assessments to allow strain-level discrimination and most importantly we need better models to elucidate the functional properties of the skin microbiome.

**Key points:**

- The microenvironment and physiology of a given skin niche drives the site-specific differences in microbiome composition.
- *S. aureus* is consistently associated with atopic dermatitis
- Gut microbes, and their metabolites, influence skin health
- Identification of skin microbiome community patterns, or Dermatypes, will assist in patient stratification
- Microbial reconstitution of the skin community may have significant therapeutic benefits

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