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Humans are still evolving, scientists say, but don't expect any winged mutants like this from "X-Men: The Last Stand."

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[Best evidence so far that humans are still evolving, scientists say](#)

Ordinary people evolve to have extraordinary capabilities on TV shows like “Heroes” and movies like the ["X-Men" franchise](#). In real life, people don't have genetic mutations that give rise to wings or telepathy, but scientists say human evolution is still happening. A new study published in [Proceedings of the National Academy](#)

[of Science](#), offers some of the best evidence so far.

Researchers at the University of Quebec at Montreal examined a very detailed database of church records for residents of Ile aux Coudres, a tiny island northeast of Quebec City, Quebec, between 1799 and 1940.

The data allowed scientists to track the ages at which female residents had their first-born children. Among those women, the average age of first reproduction dropped from 26 to 22. The study supports the idea that increasingly younger birth ages were influenced by genetic changes caused by natural selection. In other words, the propensity to have a child at a younger age is the result of inherited genetic traits, the study suggests. (Evolution means that organisms change over time based on inherited traits).

"The study is the first to demonstrate a genetic response to selection in a very important demographic trait in a human population in such recent times," said Yale University professor of evolutionary biology Stephen C. Stearns, Ph.D., who helped to review the study.

The evolutionary change is likely due to falling mortality rates, says Stearns. Better hygiene, vaccines and medicine that allow more infants to survive, he says, are likely linked to ongoing evolution among the women on Ile aux Coudres who had children earlier with each successive generation.

This new research follows other recent studies that suggest [human evolution is ongoing](#).

"It is probably one of the very best confirmations so far that human populations are still evolving," Stearns says. Until recently, it was assumed that humans hadn't changed in any significant way genetically since the ancient Greeks or earlier, he says.

"I think that science is now showing that it may be happening slowly - but we are still changing," says Stearns, who authored [a similar study using detailed medical records beginning in 1948](#) from a group of people in Framingham, Massachusetts.

But a co-author of the new study, Emmanuel Milot, points out that just because "evolution is possible in rapid time, doesn't mean that it's occurring all the time."

"We're changing," Stearns says, "in ways that are being shaped by our culture."

In this case, he says, the evolutionary change is likely due to falling mortality rates, says Stearns. Better hygiene, vaccines and medicine that allow more infants to survive, he says, are likely linked to ongoing evolution among the women on Ile aux Coudres who had children earlier with each successive generation.

It's not the first study to suggest this idea.

Tibetans in the Himalayas have evolved to better adapt to low oxygen at high altitudes over just a few hundred generations, [according to research published last year](#).

[Other studies revealed](#) that adult humans in regions of Africa and Northern Europe developed the ability to tolerate lactose in their diets as recently as 5,000 or 6,000 years ago. Scientists say the evolution was linked to the cultural reliance on milk as an agricultural product.

"What is different with our study," says Milot, "is we follow the change from one generation to another in the population. The lactose tolerance and Tibetan studies are processes that occur during a longer time that leave patterns in the genes of the population."

The Quebec study will help scientists close in on one of the biggest cutting edge questions in the study of contemporary evolution. How important is specific genetic makeup when it comes to medical treatment? Physicians in the future may improve health care by learning more about how treatment outcomes are linked to

the particular genetic maps of their patients.

Although science has overwhelmingly accepted Charles Darwin's 19th century theory of genetic evolution by natural selection, the concept still has its doubters. In fact, when CNN Light Years opened up the floor to [reader comments on the topic of evolution](#), there were more than 3,500 responses, with a broad mixture of opinions, and clearly some people have strong views about whether religious beliefs can mesh with evolution. But the scientific community treats evolution as an established fact.

By the way, just for fun, we had to ask: what about super powers? Any chance that ongoing evolution will be creating any winged super heroes any time soon?

Um, no, says Stearns.

"No mutations producing another pair of appendages have ever been observed - among humans or any four-legged creatures - in 350 million years. That's among millions of different species - not only our own. It's not going to happen."

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Light up the Screen

Glossary

[CME](#) - coronal mass ejection: a burst of solar winds, plasma and magnetic fields released into space. Not the same as a solar flare.

[Lightyear \(ly\)](#) - As defined by the International Astronomical Union: the distance that light travels in a vacuum in one Julian year.

[MECO](#) - main-engine cutoff, the point at which a space craft's main engines stop firing.

[Stringer](#) - A vertical strip of metal, 108 of which surround the Shuttle's external tank and provide structural support.

[SRB](#) - solid rocket booster, one of the twin rockets that flank the space shuttle and provide extra thrust to achieve orbit.

Launch Calendar

October 25 | [National Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System Preparatory Project \(NPP\)](#)

November 8 | [Phobos-Grunt: Russian mission to Mars moon, including sample return](#)

November 14 | [Soyuz launch to ISS, first manned launch since Soyuz failure of August 24](#)

November 25 | [Mars Science Laboratory](#)

November 30 | [SpaceX Falcon 9/Dragon](#)

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