



Survival of the Sickest: A Medical Maverick Discovers Why We Need Disease

By Sharon Moalem, Jonathan Prince

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Was diabetes evolution's response to the last Ice Age? Did a deadly genetic disease help our ancestors survive the bubonic plagues of Europe? Will a visit to the tanning salon help lower your cholesterol? Why do we age? Why are some people immune to HIV? Can your genes be turned on -- or off?

Joining the ranks of modern myth busters, Dr. Sharon Moalem turns our current understanding of illness on its head and challenges us to fundamentally change the way we think about our bodies, our health, and our relationship to just about every other living thing on earth, from plants and animals to insects and bacteria.

Through a fresh and engaging examination of our evolutionary history, Dr. Moalem reveals how many of the conditions that are diseases today actually gave our ancestors a leg up in the survival sweepstakes. When the option is a long life with a disease or a short one without it, evolution opts for disease almost every time.

Everything from the climate our ancestors lived in to the crops they planted and ate to their beverage of choice can be seen in our genetic inheritance. But Survival of the Sickest doesn't stop there. It goes on to demonstrate just how little modern medicine really understands about human health, and offers a new way of thinking that can help all of us live longer, healthier lives.

Survival of the Sickest is filled with fascinating insights and cutting-edge research, presented in a way that is both accessible and utterly absorbing. This is a book about the interconnectedness of all life on earth -- and, especially, what that means for us.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Dan Ariely on *Survival of the Sickest*

MIT professor Dan Ariely has become one of the leaders in the growing field of behavioral economics, and his bestselling book debut, *Predictably Irrational*, has brought his ideas--and his ingenious experiments and charming sense of humor--to a much wider audience. With the simplest of tests (often an auction or a quiz given under a few conditions) he shows again and again not only that we are wired to make irrational decisions in many situations, but that we do so in remarkably predictable ways.



I have always been puzzled by the way in which genetic diseases have managed to survive throughout the ages. How could it be that these diseases were able to withstand the evolutionary process, where only the most fit survive, and continue to be transferred from one generation to the next? Survival of the Sickest provides a thought provoking yet entertaining explanation to this puzzle.

In this insightful book Dr. Sharon Moalem demonstrates how conditions that are considered unhealthy (such as hemochromatosis, diabetes, and high cholesterol), or even deadly in extreme cases, might actually put their carriers at an advantage in combating other life-threatening illnesses. For example, he explains that hemochromatosis, a disease that, if left untreated, will kill you, may have actually been a defense against the deadliest pandemic in history--the bubonic plague during the 14th century. It turns out that this genetic mutation, which continues to be passed down through generations, actually helped spare many lives at one point.

Throughout the book, Dr. Moalem draws many connections between seemingly disparate subjects, such as the accidental invention of ice wine and cold diuresis, in order to illustrate the basic mechanisms of genetics and medicine in charming and intuitive ways. He skillfully interweaves his knowledge of history, genetics, and medicine not only as they relate to specific medical conditions but also in a way that addresses important challenges of modern society and our future evolution.

In the most general terms, Dr. Moalem's description of the human body and its complexity left me in awe of how far we have come in our understanding of biology and medicine, while also being reminded that the road to understanding ourselves is still wide open with much more to learn in the decades, and even centuries, to come. It is a fantastic journey on which he leads us and Dr. Moalem is a kind, knowledgeable, humorous, and helpful guide.

From Publishers Weekly

Moalem, a medical student with a Ph.D. in neurogenetics, asks a number of provocative questions, such as why debilitating hereditary diseases persist in humans and why we suffer from the consequences of aging. His approach to these questions is solidly rooted in evolutionary theory, and he capably demonstrates that each disease confers a selective advantage to individuals who carry either one or two alleles for inherited diseases. But very little is new; the principles, if not every particular, that Moalem addresses have been covered in Randolph Nesse and George Williams's *Why We Get Sick*, among others. Whether he is discussing hemochromatosis (a disorder that causes massive amounts of iron to accumulate in individuals), diabetes or sickle cell anemia, his conclusion is always the same: each condition offers enough positive evolutionary advantages to offset the negative consequences, and this message is repeated over and over. Additionally, Moalem's endless puns and simple jokes wear thin, but his light style makes for easy reading for readers new to this subject. (Feb.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Moalem must have been the kind of child who liked to pick things up and look at them every which way, inside and out. Why else ask whether there is a reason for such afflictions as diabetes, sickle-cell anemia, and antibiotic-resistant infection? Everyone knows such ailments are a curse, a punishment, or, at minimum, bad luck--right? On the other hand, as Moalem notes, if every living thing dances to the same two-step imperative, survive and reproduce, then even the diseases our increasingly homogeneous society struggles to conquer once must have served a purpose. So, why high cholesterol? Perhaps this tendency and myriad other diseases endured so that their hosts might survive to reproduce, evolutionarily speaking. Maybe asking these kinds of questions will help scientists learn how to predict who is at risk and will lead to individualized intervention to prevent or minimize the impacts of genetic illnesses. Fortunately for readers, for neurogeneticist Moalem and writing collaborator Prince, fun with words, genes, and ideas is part of the deal.

Donna Chavez

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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