

## **Project MERCCURI**

UC Davis  
SciStarter.com  
Science Cheerleader

Media Contact:  
Claire LaBeaux  
[claire@prclaire.com](mailto:claire@prclaire.com)  
925-337-0244



### **Astronauts Tracking Microbe Growth on the International Space Station This Week** *Project MERCCURI Progresses;* *Microbe Growth Documented for Analysis and Interpretation by UC Davis Scientists*

Davis, CA. (December 10, 2014) – This week on the International Space Station, astronaut Terry Virts is measuring the growth of microbes collected by citizen scientists across the United States.

This citizen science research, known as [Project MERCCURI](http://ProjectMERCCURI.com), investigates how microbes from different places on Earth compare to each other and to those found on the International Space Station.

The microbes shot into space on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket in April of this year. The microbes rested in a freezer at -80°C until the testing began earlier this week. UC Davis has received confirmation that the microbes are now growing in space, and the team in the Microbiology Lab will soon analyze the data on the individual microbes to see which won the “Microbial Playoffs.” Scientists are looking for winning microbes in three different categories:

- **Best Sprinter:** the microbial competitor who can grow the fastest during the sprinting portion of growth (technically known as the “exponential growth phase”).
- **Best Huddle:** the microbial competitor who can grow to the highest density... really packing those cells into the space allowed.
- **Best Tip Off:** the microbial competitor who takes off growing like crazy from the start.

Thousands of citizen scientists have the opportunity to look up in the sky, see the Space Station whipping by at 17,000 MPH, and realize that their microbes are being examined there this week! To find out when the International Space Station is visible locally, visit <http://spotthestation.nasa.gov/>.

Microbe collection for Project MERCCURI was led by the Science Cheerleaders (current and former NFL and NBA cheerleaders pursuing science and technology careers). Thousands of people across the United States participated in the project. Several Pop Warner cheer teams swabbed practice fields, shoes, and cell phones for microbes. Other people collected microbial samples at NFL, NBA, and MLB stadiums; from schools; from landmarks like the Liberty Bell, Sue the T-Rex, the statue of Ben Franklin

in Philadelphia, and the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum; and during events including Yuri's Nights, a series of gatherings across the country to commemorate the first human in space.

The microbes they gathered were examined by the "microbiology team" in the laboratory of Dr. Jonathan Eisen at the University of California at Davis. The team selected 48 microbes, which, with approval from NASA, rode the SpaceX Falcon 9 to the Space Station for further research. Updates on the "microbial playoffs" growth competition are available via the web site [SpaceMicrobes.org](http://SpaceMicrobes.org) and on Twitter at the hashtag #spacemicrobes.

"This initiative is not just about significant research," said Darlene Cavalier, Founder of Science Cheerleader and SciStarter. "It's about engaging the public in that research. Microbes that they collected are taking a ride on the International Space Station. They're the subject of research by microbiologists and astronauts. We hope that inspires youngsters as well as adults to become more aware of and involved in science. They can also learn about and participate in other interesting citizen science projects by visiting [www.SciStarter.com](http://www.SciStarter.com)."

Project MERCCURI is coordinated by Science Cheerleader, SciStarter.com, and UC Davis, in conjunction with the Argonne National Laboratory. The Project is made possible by Space Florida, NanoRacks, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

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