



Threadworms

The life of a threadworm

Threadworms live in human guts (intestines). The female worm lays eggs around the anus (back passage), usually at night. These can make the skin around the anus itchy. Scratching the bottom near the anus can cause eggs to get onto fingers and under nails. Eggs may be swallowed if a finger is put into the mouth. These then grow into more worms in the gut. The worms live about 5-6 weeks and then die. If they have laid eggs around the anus this 'cycle' of worm infection can go on and on. Children can swallow some worm eggs at first by playing with other infected children or from contaminated food, drink or dust.

Are threadworms harmful?

Not usually. The worst thing about them is the itch and discomfort around the anus and bottom. This sometimes wakes children from sleep. The worms sometimes travel around to the vaginal area in girls, causing itch around the genitals. Large numbers of threadworms can possibly cause mild abdominal (tummy) pains and make a child irritable.

What do threadworms look like?

Threadworms look like thin white threads. They grow to about 10 mm long. Sometimes they are seen in a child's stool (motion) in the toilet. The eggs are too small to see without a microscope. If threadworms are suspected due to any itchy bottom but are not obvious in the motions, try inspecting the child's anus. This can be done with a torch in the late evening after the child has gone to sleep. Part the child's buttocks and look at the opening of the anus. If threadworms are present they are often seen coming out of the anus. Do not be alarmed! Seek advice from a pharmacist in the next few days on treatment.

What should be done?

Medicines that kill the worms are available at pharmacies or on prescription. All members of the household including adults and those without symptoms should take treatment. This is because it is common to have worms in the gut with little or no symptoms. A repeat treatment 2 weeks after the first is commonly advised to be sure all worms are gone. Tell the pharmacist or doctor if treatment is for pregnant or breast feeding women or children under the age of 2 years. Some medicines are not suitable for these people.

In *addition* the following are important for every member of the household to do for one week. This is because eggs may have been laid around the anus. The medicine will kill the worms but not these eggs. A further cycle of infection may occur if these eggs are scratched and get into the mouth. Pregnant women may prefer to do these measures alone to avoid taking medicine.

- ◆ Wear pants at night. Any scratching in the sleep does not then touch the skin near the anus.
- ◆ Keep the fingernails short. Wash hands and scrub nails each morning. Always wash hands before meals, before preparing food and after going to the toilet.
- ◆ A daily morning bath or wash around the anus will get rid of any eggs laid overnight.
- ◆ Change and wash underwear, nightwear (and bed linen if possible) each day.
- ◆ Vacuum and dust all the areas where children play.

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