

# Threadworms

(also known as pinworms)

**Threadworms are parasites that live in human intestines. They are the most common cause of 'worms' in Australia and infection is very common. Anyone can get threadworms, but because of the way they spread, children are infected more often more than adults. Medicines and thorough cleaning can get rid of threadworm infection.**

Threadworms look like short pieces of white cotton (about 5–10 mm long) that move. They only infect humans and spread when threadworm eggs pass from one person to another. Dogs, cats and other animals do not get threadworms or pass them on to people. People can catch other worm infections from animals (e.g., hookworms, hydatid disease, toxocariasis), but this is not common in Australia.

## The threadworm life cycle

If threadworm eggs are swallowed or inhaled, they can hatch in the person's gut. The larvae migrate to the small and large intestines, where they live and mature over about 4–8 weeks. When mature, the adult female worm mates and moves down to the anus where she



lays thousands of tiny eggs and then dies. This usually happens at night when the person is asleep or relaxed.

The 'glue' that sticks the eggs to the anus causes skin irritation, which leads the infected person to scratch the area.

The eggs then stick to fingers and under fingernails and are easily transferred to the mouth, to food and to other people, and the life cycle of the threadworms is continued. Bedclothes, underwear, towels, toys, furniture, floors (especially around toilets) and other places in the home can have threadworm eggs on them. The eggs can survive outside a human body for two or three weeks.

## Signs and symptoms

- Itching around the anus or vagina, especially at night.
- Restless sleep – sometimes resulting in bedwetting.
- Feeling irritable or mildly unwell.
- Reduced appetite, stomach pain.

Often there are no symptoms, but threadworms may be seen on a bowel motion (faeces) or around the anus.

Threadworms do not cause major health problems.

## Finding threadworms

- Look for worms on the outside surface of bowel motions. Do not mistake mucous or fluff for threadworms – look for movement.
- Look for worms moving around outside the anus when the child is complaining of itch, at night (often about an hour after going to sleep) or first thing in the morning.

- In the morning before bathing, briefly press a piece of sticky tape over the anus. Any eggs will stick to the tape. Ask a doctor to have the tape examined under a microscope.

## Medicines

Medicines for threadworm infection are available from a pharmacist without a prescription.

- Treat everyone living in the same house with the infected person, whether or not they have symptoms. The medicine should be given to everyone at the same time. Follow the dose instructions on the pack.
- Ask a pharmacist or doctor about treating pregnant women, breastfeeding women and children under two years of age.
- Shower on the night the medicine is given, and again the next morning to remove eggs laid during the night. Wash well around the anus.
- Apply protective ointment (e.g., nappy rash cream) to the anal area at bedtime to help stop scratching. Take care not to infect the ointment remaining in the container.
- A second dose of the worm medicine may be needed two or three weeks later, to catch any eggs/worms that survived the first treatment. Ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice.

## Self care

To remove threadworm eggs and prevent re-infection:

- Change and wash underwear, nightwear and, if possible bed linen and towels, every day for a few days. A hot water wash, or the heat of an iron, will kill the eggs. Do not shake bed linen indoors as this can spread eggs around.
- Shower each morning, and wash around anus.
- Do not share towels.
- Scrub fingernails to remove eggs. Urge children to stop nail biting, finger sucking and scratching their bottom.
- Keep fingernails short and clean.
- Wear firm underwear at night. Dress children in underpants, sleeping suits and mittens to prevent eggs being picked up on fingers or under fingernails when scratching.
- Vacuum and damp dust furniture, bedrooms and around the toilet to remove any eggs.
- Encourage everyone to wash their hands when looking after infected children, after using the toilet and changing nappies, and before handling food.
- Clean and disinfect the toilet seat regularly.

It is not necessary to keep a child home from childcare or school once treatment has been given.

## Important

- Threadworm medicine can kill threadworms, but it does not protect against threadworm infection.
- It is not necessary to give threadworm medicine to family members when giving worm medicine to the family's pet animals. Treatment for worm infections passed from animals to humans is usually different to treatment for threadworms.
- If someone in the household has threadworms:
  - Every member of the household should take a dose of threadworm medicine on the same day
  - Wash bedding and towels and clean house to remove threadworm eggs.

Consult a doctor if you think you have symptoms of a worm infection and:

- Threadworm medicine has not relieved symptoms
- You have recently travelled overseas (different worm infections occur in other countries)
- You have blood in your faeces
- You have abdominal pain
- You have diarrhoea or vomiting
- You have unexplained weight loss
- Scratching has damaged skin around your anus.

## For more information

### Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

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