

Threadworms: important information

What are they?

Threadworms are small, white, thread-like worms between 2.5 and 12 mm long. They infect human guts (intestines). They are common in children, but anyone of any age can be affected.

What do they look like?

Threadworms look like thin, white, cotton threads. Sometimes you can see them in faeces (stools or motions) in the toilet. If you cannot see threadworms in the faeces, but suspect your child has threadworms (if they have an itchy bottom), try inspecting the child's anus. Part the child's buttocks and look at the opening of the anus. If threadworms are present you can often see one or two coming out of the anus. Do not be alarmed! Ask your chemist for advice on treatment in the next day or so.

How do they spread?

Threadworms live about 5-6 weeks in the gut, and then die. However, before they die the female worms lay tiny eggs around the anus. This tends to be at night when you are warm and still in bed. The eggs are too small to see, but cause an itch around the anus. You then scratch around the anus to relieve the itch. You often do this without realising when you are asleep. When you scratch, eggs get onto fingers and under nails. You may then swallow some eggs if you put a finger into your mouth.

Also, threadworm eggs can survive for up to 2 weeks outside the body (on bedding, clothes, etc). So, children may swallow some eggs at first by playing with other children who have eggs on their fingers or from food, drink, or dust that has been contaminated with threadworm eggs. Any eggs that you swallow then hatch and grow into adult worms in the gut. So a 'cycle' of worm infection can go on and on.

Are threadworms harmful?

Not usually. The worst thing about them is the itch and discomfort around the anus. This sometimes wakes children from sleep. Scratching may make the anus sore. Large numbers of threadworms may possibly cause mild abdominal (tummy) pains, and make a child irritable. Very rarely, threadworms can cause other problems.

What precautions must I take?

Medicine will kill the worms in the gut, but not the eggs that have been laid around the anus. These can survive for up to 2 weeks outside the body on underwear, bedding etc. Good hygiene will clear any eggs from the body and the home, and prevent any eggs from being swallowed. This will then break the cycle of 're-infection'. Every member of the household should do the following for two weeks after the first dose of medicine.

- ❖ Wear underpants or knickers at night. This is so that if you scratch in your sleep, you will not touch the skin near the anus.

- ❖ Keep fingernails short. Wash hands and scrub nails each morning. Always wash hands before meals or snacks, before preparing food, and after going to the toilet or changing nappies.
- ❖ Every morning have a bath, or wash around the anus, to get rid of any eggs laid overnight. You must do this straight away after getting up from bed.
- ❖ Change and wash underwear, nightwear (and bed linen if possible) each day. Avoid shaking clothes and linen as any eggs on them may be wafted into the air and be swallowed.
- ❖ Also, each day for the same 14 days it is advisable to:
 - Vacuum and dust all household carpets, particularly those where children play.
 - Damp-dust smooth surfaces with a cloth rinsed in hot water. Again, particularly in places where children play.
 - Clean bathroom surfaces with a strong chlorine-based disinfectant.

Will treatment be necessary?

Treatment consists of a medicine to kill the worms AND good hygiene to break the cycle of infection described above.

You can buy the following medicines from pharmacies. You can also get them on prescription.

Mebendazole is the usual treatment for people aged over 2 years. All household members, including adults and those without symptoms, should take a dose at the same time. This is because it is common to have worms in the gut with little or no symptoms. Just one dose kills the worms. A second dose 2 weeks after the first is sometimes needed if the infection has not cleared (which may occur if you swallow some eggs after taking the medication).

This medicine is not recommended if you are pregnant. The worms will die after 6 weeks so provided you do not swallow any new eggs then no new worms will grow to replace them. Strict attention to hygiene should be sufficient.

Piperazine (Pripsen) is a different medicine, and can be used in children under 2 years (but over 3 months). You need to take 2 doses, 14 days apart.

This medicine should be avoided if you are pregnant unless prescribed by your doctor.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

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NHS Borders on 01896 825522 or email equality@borders.scot.nhs.uk

Produced by: Public Health Dept, NHS Borders, Education Centre, Borders General Hospital, Melrose, TD6 9BD, 01896 825560

June 2014