Pinworm infection is common, especially in school-age children. The most common sign of infection is an itchy bottom, around the anus. The symptoms of a pinworm infection can be annoying, but the condition is easily treated with two doses of medicine. The whole family should be treated to avoid passing the infection around.

We've brought together the research about pinworm infection and talked to experts about the best way to treat it. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

What is pinworm infection?

Pinworms are tiny parasites that live in the lower part of the intestines, near the anus. Female pinworms come out at night and lay eggs around the anus. This can cause intense itching.

When you scratch – and this can happen in your sleep – the eggs get onto your hands. They can then be passed on or swallowed, and the worms then hatch again in the intestines.

Pinworm infection sounds unpleasant but it’s very common, especially among school-age children and their parents. Pinworms are very unlikely to cause any harm, except the discomfort from itching.

You may also hear pinworms called threadworms.

What are the symptoms?

Many people with pinworm infection don’t have any symptoms. If you do get symptoms, you’re most likely to have a very itchy bottom, around the anus. The area may be red and marked by scratching.

In children who are too young to say what’s wrong, you may notice that they are restless or can’t sleep at night.

Your doctor may be able to diagnose you or your child with pinworms just by your description of the symptoms. But you may need to do a "tape test." This means you put a small piece of transparent sticky tape over the skin around the anus, first thing in the morning. It can then be checked under a microscope for pinworm eggs.
What treatments work?

The usual treatment is a dose of a type of medicine called an anthelmintic to kill the pinworms.

The medicine comes as pills or as a liquid. You need two doses, with two weeks between each dose. That’s because the medicine kills the pinworms but not their eggs, so you need the second dose to kill any newly hatched worms. More than 9 in 10 people treated with two doses of this medicine get rid of the infection.

Side effects are rare, but some people get stomach pain or diarrhea.

You can’t take some of these medicines if you’re pregnant. If you are pregnant, you may be given a medicine called pyrantel, which also works to kill pinworms.

Because pinworms spread easily between family members, your doctor may recommend that the whole family is treated, even if just one person is infected.

Things you can do for yourself

Getting a pinworm infection doesn’t mean you have poor hygiene. The condition is common and anyone can get it. But there are some simple hygiene measures you can take to reduce the chance of getting re-infected.

• Wash hands frequently, especially before eating or preparing food.
• Discourage your child from sucking their thumb, biting their nails, or scratching around their bottom when they have an infection.
• Keep fingernails short and clean.
• If you or your child has an infection, wash all your underwear and bed linen promptly. Avoid shaking the clothes and bed linen before you wash them, as this could spread the eggs around.

What will happen to me or my child?

Pinworm infection is easy to get rid of with treatment. But it’s quite common for people to get another pinworm infection. Your child may pick up the infection from other children, typically at school. The treatment is the same as for the first infection. Pinworm infection tends to become less common as children get older.

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