

Pinworms and Your Child

What are pinworms?

Pinworms are a type of worm that can get inside your body. They live in your intestines and eat some of the nutrients from your food. Usually this infection is annoying but not dangerous.

Pinworm infections are common in families with small children. If your child has pinworms, you may notice your child moving around a lot in bed at night or being unable to sleep because of an itchy bottom. The itching is caused by a female pinworm that comes out of the rectum to lay eggs around the anus (the opening to the rectum). Sometimes tiny worms (shorter than one-half inch) may be seen on the child's bottom at night or they may show up in the child's bowel movement.

How do people get pinworms?

Pinworms are easy to get. Pinworms are usually spread from child to child, and the eggs can be picked up on children's fingers when they are playing. If the eggs are on their hands or toys, and they put their fingers or toys in their mouth, the tiny eggs can enter their bodies. The eggs are very small and can only be seen with a microscope. The eggs stay in the upper part of the intestine until they hatch. After they hatch, the worms move down the length of the intestine, trying to get out to lay eggs. When the children scratch their itchy bottoms, the tiny eggs can get under their fingernails. As the children move around the house, the eggs may be spread, and other family members may become infected. Sometimes adults breathe in the eggs when the bed covers are shaken. Children easily infect each other while they are playing.

Pets do *not* spread pinworms, although they may carry their own kinds of worms.

How are pinworms detected?

Because pinworms usually crawl out of the anus while a child sleeps, the *tape test* is an easy way to find pinworms. To do the tape test, your doctor will give you a tongue depressor with a piece of clear tape on it. You will press the end of the tongue depressor—with the tape on it—against your child's anal skin. Then the tape is placed sticky-side down on a glass slide. It is best to do this test right after your child wakes up in the morning, before moving around or washing. If your child has pinworms, your doctor will be able to see the eggs with a microscope.

How do we get rid of pinworms?

Fortunately, most pinworm infections are mild and easily treated. Your doctor may prescribe a single chewable tablet of a medicine called mebendazole (Vermox). About two weeks later, a second tablet is taken. Or your doctor may recommend another kind of medicine, pyrantel (Pin-X). This is also taken in two doses about two weeks apart.

Even if only one child in a family has pinworms, it is *very* important that everyone in the household be treated with the pinworm medicine at the same time, even if they don't have any signs of pinworms. All the sheets, blankets, towels and clothing in the house should be washed in hot water, and everyone's fingernails (which might hold the worm eggs) should be carefully cleaned and cut short.

If you get treatment from your doctor right away and keep everything in the house very clean, your family's encounter with pinworms will soon be over.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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