

ROUND WORM INFESTATION (ASCARIASIS)

WHAT IS ASCARIASIS

Ascariasis is an infestation by the round worm *Ascaris lumbricoides*. It is a fairly common problem and is prevalent in areas of the world where public hygiene and sanitation are poor, including India.

WHAT CAUSES ASCARIASIS

The round worm lives as a parasite inside the small intestine of its human host. Persons of all ages can be affected. The worm itself is grayish white in color, measures 3-4 mm in diameter and upto 35 cm in length.

HOW IS IT ASCARIASIS SPREAD

Poor sanitation, particularly unrestricted public defecation and the use of human feces as manure (night soil), is responsible for the spread of the disease. A single female roundworm produces upto 200,000 eggs per day and these are passed in the feces of the infested host. The eggs are transmitted to another host either by hand to mouth transmission when soil contact contaminates fingers. Food items, especially those eaten raw like fruit and vegetables, can be contaminated. Flies also transmit the illness by carrying eggs from soil to food.

When the eggs are ingested the larvae are released in the intestine – they migrate through the blood stream into the lungs and ascend via the windpipe into the throat, where they are reswallowed. They mature into adult worms in the small intestine and a single worm can live for 1 – 2 years.

WHAT ARE THE CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF ASCARIASIS

During the stage of migration through the lungs the larvae can cause Pulmonary Ascariasis, manifested by cough and bloodstained sputum.

Once the worms establish themselves in the small intestine, they can cause vague abdominal symptoms like abdominal pain and distension. In young children, they can occasionally cause obstruction of the intestine.

Sometimes live worms are passed in stool and this is very scary, both for the child and the parent.

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS OF ASCARIASIS

Complications are generally uncommon. However, because the worms are quite large, they can obstruct the intestine of small children (aged 1-6 years). When this happens, there will be severe colicky abdominal pain and abdominal distension. This is a medical emergency and generally requires surgery.

Sometimes the worms can migrate into the bile duct from the small intestine and this can result in abdominal pain, fever, nausea and vomiting.

HOW IS ASCARIASIS TREATED

Your doctor may request a stool examination to check for “Ova and Parasites” – this is often written as “Stool O & P”.

Several oral medicines are available that kill the worms, including Piperazine and Mebendazole (Mebex). The worms will be passed in the stool after taking the medication.

WHAT IS THE PROGNOSIS

The prognosis is excellent.

CAN ASCARIASIS BE PREVENTED

Improved public hygiene and sanitation are the only ways to control Ascariasis. Public defecation unfortunately is common in India. You can do the following to help prevent infestation:

1. Always wash hands with soap after using the toilet
2. Always wash hands before eating
3. Insist that your children wash their hands and feet thoroughly after they have played outside
4. Do not eat food from street vendors
5. Wash all raw fruit and vegetables thoroughly
6. Discourage flies wherever possible