

The Children's Doctor



My 4 grandchildren have repeatedly had infections with “threadworms”. Their parents are needing to medicate them regularly which is expensive and they prefer natural remedies. What else can we do?

Threadworms are extremely common, particularly in preschool and school age children. Threadworms live in the intestine but need to come to the surface (around the anus) to lay eggs. These eggs are then usually carried under fingernails or on fingertips back to the mouth or to some other surface. Threadworm eggs can survive for up to 2 weeks on surfaces outside the body allowing easy spread to other unsuspecting individuals! Threadworm infestation is usually mild. The most common presenting symptom is an itchy bottom, especially at night when the worms are surfacing to lay their eggs. Your child might be a bit irritable or unsettled overnight. You can confirm that your child has worms by examining their bottom with a torch about 1 hour after the child has gone to bed.

Worms are usually easily and effectively treated with over the counter medications from the pharmacist. These medications are made specifically for children and usually taste nice. The child should shower on the night the medication is given and again the next morning to remove all eggs. It is important to treat the whole family as there is normally more than one family member affected, even if they have no symptoms. Some people prefer natural remedies. There is not much scientific evidence on the effectiveness of natural remedies for threadworm. A recent suggestion for children is taking grapefruit seed extract. Other natural treatments include eating pumpkin seeds or carrots.

Although re-infestation is common, there are some things you can try to prevent it. Encourage your child not to scratch despite feeling itchy. Sometimes topical barrier creams can be helpful in relieving the itch but make sure hands are washed well after applying. Keep your child's fingernails clean and trimmed. Discourage thumb sucking and nail biting. Teach your child to wash their hands for at least 10 seconds after toileting. Change bedding and vacuum regularly to remove any eggs. If you have any concerns about the frequency or severity of infestations affecting your children, you should see your doctor.