

Leech

Leeches are commonly called bloodsuckers, as some species feed on the blood of people or animals.

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Pollution tolerance	Very sensitive Sensitive Tolerant Very tolerant
Size	From 7 mm up to 80mm, when extended

What they look like

Leeches are segmented, cylindrical worms with a sucker on each end, one being a mouth. In many forms, the mouth has three small jaws equipped with sharp teeth. Leeches can swim. They can also walk, which they do in a looping manner. Their body shape depends on whether their muscles are relaxed or taut.

Where they live

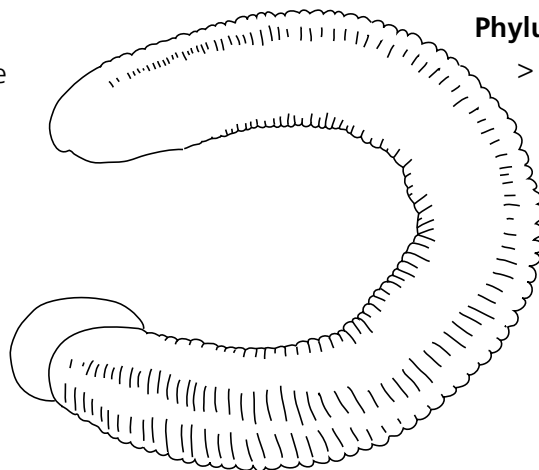
Leeches are found in warm, slow-flowing rivers or ponds. They prefer shallow water, and live under rocks and debris, or on plants, where they attach themselves to something solid.

What they eat

Many Leeches feed on the blood of vertebrates such as amphibians, birds, reptiles, fish and mammals (including humans). Not all Leeches attach themselves to their food - some eat their prey whole!

Pollution tolerance

Very tolerant, rating 1
Leeches are able to survive where there is not much oxygen. They can also tolerate various chemical pollutants.



What's interesting about the Leech?

- Their salivary secretions contain hirudin, an anticoagulant (a substance that stops blood from thickening, or coagulating). This makes the blood runny, for easy sucking, rather like a milk shake as opposed to a thick shake!
- Some Leeches can survive up to 12 months after a blood meal because they can store lots of it in their body
- Leeches hibernate during drought by burrowing into mud. They can survive a loss of nine-tenths of their body weight.
- Leeches are hermaphrodites - a single leech is both male and female.
- Medicinal leeches, once used by doctors to treat a variety of sicknesses, are still used in some countries.

Where they fit in

Phylum Annelida > **Class** Hirudinea
> **Family** (Five aquatic families in Australia): Glossiphoniidae; Hirundinidae; Eropbdellidae; Ornithobdellidae; Ozobranchidae.