

Angiostrongylus cantonensis FAQs

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What is *Angiostrongylus cantonensis*?

Angiostrongylus cantonensis is a parasitic worm of rats. It is also called the rat lungworm. The adult form of the parasite is found only in rodents. Infected rats pass larvae of the parasite in their feces. Snails, slugs, freshwater shrimp, land crabs, frogs or lizards get infected by ingesting the larvae. These larvae mature in snails, slugs, freshwater shrimp, land crabs, frogs and lizards but do not become adult worms. The life cycle is completed when rats eat infected snails or slugs and the larvae further mature to become adult worms.

Can people get infected with this parasite?

Yes. People can get infected, under unusual circumstances. However, even if infected, most people recover fully without treatment.

How can people get infected?

People can get infected by eating raw or undercooked snails or slugs, and less commonly in the U.S., freshwater shrimp, land crabs, frogs or lizards that are infected with this parasite. In some cultures, snails are commonly eaten. Some children, in particular, have gotten infected by swallowing snails/slugs "on a dare." People also can get infected by accident, by eating raw produce (such as lettuce) that contains a small snail or slug or part of one.

Can an infected person infect other people?

No.

In what parts of the world have people become infected with this parasite?

In many parts, but most of the known cases of infection have been in parts of Asia and the Pacific Islands. Some have been in other areas of the world, such as in the Caribbean and Africa. The parasite was previously identified in Miami-Dade County, Florida, and more recently researchers have found the parasite in other areas of the state.

Have cases of this infection occurred in the United States?

Yes. Cases have occurred in Hawaii (and other Pacific Islands). Very few cases have been reported in the continental United States. In 1993, a boy in New Orleans got infected by swallowing a raw snail "on a dare." The type of snail he swallowed isn't known. He became ill a few weeks later, with muscle aches, headache, stiff neck, a slight fever, and vomiting. His symptoms went away in about 2 weeks, without treatment of the infection. Infections in two captive non-human primates (monkeys) were also reported in Miami-Dade County, Florida in the past.

What are the signs and symptoms of infection with this parasite?

Some infected people don't have any symptoms -- or have only mild symptoms that don't last very long. Sometimes the infection causes a rare type of meningitis (eosinophilic meningitis). The symptoms can include headache, stiff neck, tingling or painful feelings in the skin, low-grade fever, nausea, and vomiting.

What should I do if I think I might be infected with this parasite?

You should see your health care provider, who will examine you and ask about any symptoms, travel, and exposures you've had (for example, to snails/slugs). You might have some blood tests, as well as tests for meningitis.

Does infection with this parasite need to be treated?

Usually not. The parasite dies over time, even without treatment. Even people who develop eosinophilic meningitis usually don't need antibiotics. Sometimes the symptoms of the infection last for several weeks or months, while the body's immune system responds to the dying parasites. The most common types of treatment are for the symptoms of the infection, such as pain medication for headache or medications to reduce the body's reaction to the parasite, rather than for the infection itself. Patients with severe cases of meningitis may benefit from some other types of treatment.

How can I keep from getting infected with this parasite?

Don't eat raw or undercooked snails, slugs, freshwater shrimp, land crabs, frogs or lizards. If you handle snails or slugs, wear gloves and wash your hands. Always remember to thoroughly wash fresh produce. When traveling in areas outside the U.S. where the parasite is common and commercial food hygiene practices may not be as standardized and well-regulated as in the U.S. and other developed countries, avoid eating uncooked vegetables.