

Marine leeches



Common hosts: Fish, sharks and rays

Habitat: Exterior surface, fins, anus, gill cavity, and spiracle

Description: Leeches are generally long and flat, and have suckers on each end. The small sucker surrounds the mouth.

Movement: Leeches crawl like caterpillars, "inch-worming" across the host's body surface.

Feeding: Leeches feed by making a series of small cuts on the skin and then ingesting the blood. An anticoagulant released by the leech prevents the blood from clotting.

To further aid feeding, leeches inject histamine into the host's blood vessels. This causes the vessels to dilate, thus increasing the blood flow. Some species need to feed as often as once per week, while others feed only every 6 months.

More nastiness!

Some leeches can carry blood parasites from fish to fish in the same way that mosquitoes carry malaria between humans.



This ray bears an enormous green and gold leech! Note the wounds on the skin of the ray where the leech has previously fed!



This Port Jackson shark has a plump leech attached to its chin

Further contact:

Dr Kate S. Hutson
School of Marine & Tropical Biology
James Cook University
Townsville
Queensland 4811
P: +61 7 4781 6216
F: +61 7 4781 4585
E: kate.hutson@jcu.edu.au

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