

Bilharzia (Schistosomiasis)

Liverpool School of
Tropical Medicine



What is Bilharzia?

Bilharzia is a worm (blood fluke) infection affecting humans. The adult worms typically live in the blood vessels around the bowel or bladder (depending on the type). The worms produce eggs which can cause health problems.

Transmission occurs through direct contact with infected fresh water in rivers, lakes, streams, dams and rock pools. The immature form of the bloodfluke (cercaria) are released from fresh water snails and penetrate the skin and occasionally through the lining of the mouth.

Which countries are affected?

Bilharzia is present in most African countries and in limited areas of South America, the Middle East and Asia

Prevention:

Avoid swimming, wading and washing in infected water and drinking untreated fresh water

What are the signs and symptoms?

Frequently people who have the infection have **no symptoms at all**. However, symptoms may occur when:

- The parasite enters the skin – you may get an itch known as swimmers itch or rash.
- The parasite first starts to produce eggs – these may cause an allergic reaction consisting of some of the following symptoms: fever, headache, rashes cough and tiredness.
- The parasite produces eggs – you may notice blood in your urine or semen, or bloody diarrhoea (depending on the type of parasite).

Very occasionally in untreated infections the worm may cause more serious illnesses such as paralysis and fits.

Screening:

Screening for Bilharzia is important after possible exposures and usually involves a blood test, urine collection and a stool test.

If there are **no symptoms**, the earliest possible screening is performed 3 months after the exposure.

Taking treatment immediately after exposure is not effective.