

Leeches

What is a leech?

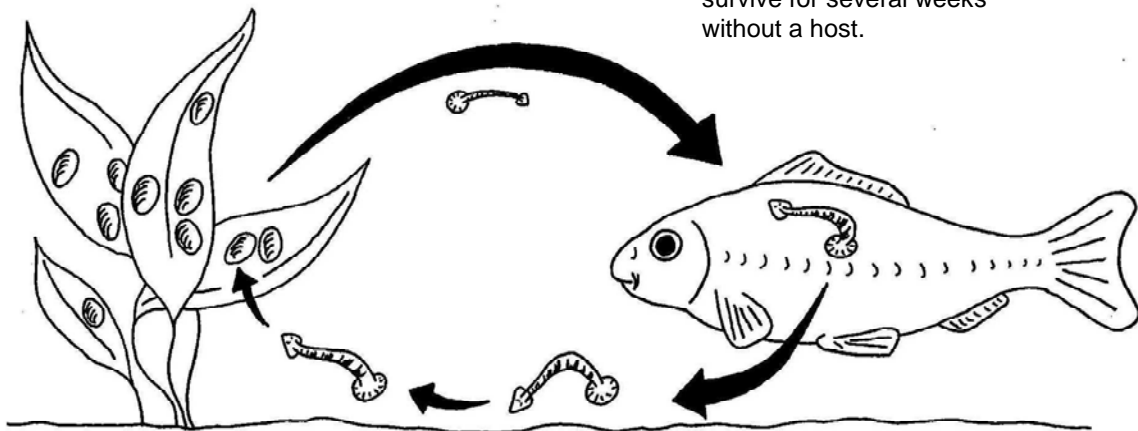
Leeches are segmented worms with long, slender, flexible bodies. They are usually 15-30mm in length and can easily be seen. They are brown with suckers at each end of the body. These suckers are used to attach to the fish and they enable the leech to move freely over the body surface. The leech usually attaches to the flanks or belly of a fish. They can also be found in sheltered areas such as on the gills and in the mouth. They have a simple life cycle. Leeches are common parasites in fisheries. The most frequent species in the UK is *Piscicola geometra* which can infect most species of fish.



A close up of *Piscicola geometra*.

Development in the cocoon can be as short as one week before the leech hatches from the egg.

Once hatched the leech must find a fish to feed on, but can survive for several weeks without a host.



Eggs are laid in cocoons which attach to aquatic plants or rocks.

The leech will leave the fish when it is full up on blood or to lay eggs.

Although leeches are hermaphrodite and have male and female sex organs, they need to cross-fertilise with another leech to reproduce.

The life cycle of *Piscicola geometra*.

What do leeches do?

When feeding, leeches insert a slender, tubular organ (called a proboscis) into the skin. This allows blood to flow from the fish to the parasite. The feeding action and attachment can result in damage to the fish, causing lesions and bleeding on the skin.



This can lead to further bacterial or fungal infections and the fish may even suffer from reduced blood supply. Despite the damage caused fish can easily tolerate low numbers of the parasite. As a result of feeding, leeches may transmit blood parasites and viruses to the fish.

Minimising the problems with leeches

There are no effective treatments for leeches once they have become established. Prevention of exposure and sensible fishery management (such as reduced stock densities and lower angling pressure) are the most effective methods for controlling leeches. As they are a natural part of the environment, low numbers on fish should not be of concern.

Leeches rarely cause problems to whole populations of fish. When this does occur however, leeches are seen to be indicators of other problems within the fishery. If present in high numbers (especially in the warmer months), disease, poor habitat, and overstocking are issues that can make leech problems worse.



Piscicola geometra in the mouth of a common carp.



A leech attached to a fish.

A healthy fish can avoid these parasites, whereas sick fish cannot. If a fish is sick and resting on the bottom of a fishery, it is easy for leeches to attach to it. This is also the case during the colder months when fish are less active, (low numbers are commonly seen by pike anglers in the winter) and are spending more time conserving energy on the bottom of a fishery. Leech infections may be higher due to the fish being in a dormant state.

For more information about managing stock density, good habitat and monitoring water quality, see the relevant fact sheets in this series.

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