

# Bilharzia (Schistosomiasis)

Liverpool School of  
Tropical Medicine



## What is Bilharzia?

Schistosomiasis (also known as Bilharzia) is a parasitic infection caused by schistosome worms. 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 blood fluke (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 found in tropical and sub-tropical countries all over the world including most African countries and in limited areas of South America, the Middle East and Asia. Many cases diagnosed in the UK result from swimming in Lake Malawi.

**There is no vaccine for Bilharzia.  
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 itchy skin; known as a 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 serious liver, bladder and kidney problems and may lead to bladder cancer.

## Screening:

Screening for Bilharzia is important after possible exposures and usually involves a blood test, urine collection and a stool test. The earliest screening can be carried out is at least 8 - 12 weeks after exposure.

Patients should be referred to a specialist infectious diseases or tropical medicine specialist for treatment.

Treatment for schistosomiasis is a tablet called Praziquantel.

**Taking treatment immediately after possible exposure is not effective.**

For a map showing global distribution of Bilharzia access the following link:

WHO: [Schistosomiasis](#)

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