

Parasite infects poor women's reproductive organs

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Faculty of Life Sciences at the University of Copenhagen shows that the parasitic disease, commonly known as snail fever, or schistosomiasis, almost eats its way into women's reproductive organs. Today researchers from all over the world are gathering in Copenhagen to find out what can be done to halt the disease which is affecting millions of women in Africa.

Six hundred million people in, for example, Africa live with the daily risk of being infected with the parasitic disease schistosomiasis, otherwise known as snail [fever](#). It happens when they bathe and wash clothes in local rivers and lakes.

Until now, it has been known that the illness, which is transmitted via [parasites](#) in the water, causes damage to internal organs if it is allowed to live in the organism. However, a new field study on Madagascar carried out by researchers at LIFE - Faculty of Life Sciences shows that the parasite also inflicts considerable damage to women's reproductive organs, making them particularly vulnerable to infection.

Easier for infections to take hold

"We know that 200 million people are already infected with the parasite. What we didn't know before now was that over the years the parasite causes sores in the woman's reproductive organs, which makes it easier for infections such as [HIV](#) to take hold," explains Doctor of Science

Niels Ørnbjerg from the Department of Veterinary Disease Biology at LIFE.

"What the parasite does is to lay eggs in the reproductive organs, resulting in chronic infection. This infection causes perforations or sores in the woman's reproductive organs. For many of the millions of women who have been repeatedly infected with the parasite, it is not actually possible to do anything once the damage has been done. However, the prospects look slightly brighter for younger women where the parasite has not yet disappeared from the body – in such cases it is possible to provide treatment," says doctor and professor at LIFE, Birgitte Vennervald, who was also one of the researchers on the field trip to Madagascar.

Previously, studies have been made of the damage which the parasite causes in humans, but it has not been known until now how extensively women's internal reproductive organs are affected.

Also damages men's reproductive organs

"Previous studies have shown that locals have told researchers that they have suspected there was a connection between the illness and infertility – but it has not been studied and analysed before now. We know that the parasite also damages men's internal reproductive organs, and we suspect that it is also related to reduced fertility. Men are also infected, but have fewer symptoms than women. However, we have established an infectious reaction and seen that the infected cells are spread via the man's semen," says Birgitte Vennervald.

Birgitte Vennervald goes on to explain that Danes travelling to, for example, Malawi also risk being infected with the parasite, and that one-off cases are diagnosed every year in Denmark. Fortunately the disease, if diagnosed early on, can be effectively treated with tablets.

Something must be done now

On Thursday 28 October, LIFE - Faculty of Life Sciences is inviting senior researchers from around the world to a workshop in Copenhagen to discuss treatment options for young women in areas where the parasite is found:

"In light of the results from our field studies and in line with the UN's 2015 goals which, among other things, focus on the reproductive health of mothers and children, we will look at the possibilities of starting specific treatment and prevention programmes for young girls in the areas affected by the parasite. It is primarily the sub-Saharan countries which are particularly affected - and in the first instance we will target the programmes at schoolchildren and girls where it will be possible to prevent damage to the reproductive organs," explains Niels Ørnbjerg.

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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