

Parasitic worms: Hidden global health threat

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With close to one third of the world's population infected with parasitic worms, MUHC researcher Dr. Theresa Gyorkos is thinking big when it comes to finding a solution to this global public health challenge. As part of an international research and policy team, she is contributing to the soon-to-be-released WHO Strategic Plan to control intestinal worm infections in more than 100 countries. Dr. Gyorkos received the Canadian Public Health Association's (CPHA) 2011 International Award for her contributions to global public health at the CPHA annual conference this week in Montreal.

"I am very proud to have both my research and mentoring contributions recognized by the CPHA," says Dr. Gyorkos, a researcher in [Clinical Epidemiology](#) at the Research Institute of the MUHC and a professor in Epidemiology, Biostatistics and [Occupational Health](#) at McGill University. "The contributions made by my research team in Canada and with partners in other countries, on prevention and control of soil-transmitted helminth infections, aims to improve the lives of many people around the world."

Soil-transmitted helminths – commonly known as intestinal worms – which include roundworms, whipworms, and hookworms, enter the human body in a number of ways, such as through fecally contaminated food, drinking water, fingers and objects, and even walking on soil contaminated by the invisible parasite eggs. Once inside the body, the worms feed off their host and reproduce prolifically.

"Parasitic [worm infections](#) exacerbate co-existing malnutrition and

weaken the immune system causing fatigue and anemia, impairing cognition, and reducing productivity throughout the lifespan" says Dr. Gyorkos. "Children are particularly vulnerable to parasitic worm infections, affecting their nutrition, education, and ultimately, their economic productivity as adults."

Most of the estimated two billion people afflicted with [parasitic worms](#) live in developing countries where clean drinking water and sanitation systems are inadequate. Dr. Gyorkos's research program, which is primarily based in Peru, focuses specifically on the three population groups at highest risk of worm-attributable morbidity: school-age children, preschool-age children and pregnant women.

"The challenge is getting governments to establish plans of action and health policy to ensure that anthelmintic drugs – that are now free of charge and administered in a single dose – can be distributed in as effective and efficient a way as possible in their country," says Dr. Gyorkos. "We are working with the teachers, the principals and parents to enhance health education curricula and to get these drugs administered in schools so we can reach the greatest number of children."

The CPHA International [Public Health](#) Award recognizes the individuals or organizations that have made a contribution to promoting public health in resource-poor societies through the development of healthy public policy, strengthening of primary health care services, promotion of the value of equity in access to health-promoting environments, and/or the enhancement of community participation.

Provided by McGill University Health Centre

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