

Parasitologist espouses using parasitic worms for treatment of autoimmune diseases

November 8 2012, by Bob Yirka

(Medical Xpress)—Doctor Joel Weinstock, a parasitologist at Tufts Medical Center in a commentary piece published in the journal *Nature*, describes work that he and colleagues have been involved in that focuses on studying the possibility of introducing parasitic worms into the guts of patients suffering from autoimmune diseases such as Crohn's disease. The thinking he says, is that modern hygienic lifestyles may be contributing to such diseases and that reintroducing parasitic worms and perhaps certain bacteria into the gut may restore a natural balance in the gut and relieve patients of such symptoms as chronic diarrhea, bleeding and infections.

Currently, one of the ways to treat Crohn's disease is to surgically remove the parts of the intestine that the immune system is attacking – a treatment that quite often provides relief for just a short period of time as many patients find new parts of their intestine become targets. Dr. Weinstock says he began wondering about the possibility of there being a link between eating foods that have been cleansed of all bacteria and worm eggs and [autoimmune diseases](#), while sitting trapped on a runway waiting for hours for his flight to take off back in the mid 1990's. Since then he has been working with others in the field to set up clinical trials to see if introducing certain parasites, such as pig whipworms, into the gut might help patients. In his commentary piece he says that thus far the trials have shown such treatment to be both safe and effective.

Weinstock writes that it's not as simple as simply feeding worms or bacteria to patients to see if doing so helps. It has to be done in a very

controlled scientific way so as to learn which parasites and/or bacteria help patients under which conditions. He notes that along with such trials is the ever present danger of introducing agents that can be harmful and for that reason warns those suffering from Crohn's, [ulcerative colitis](#), or even [type I diabetes](#), against taking matters into their own hands. Pig whipworm eggs can be purchased online for example and ingested with water. And while there may be some anecdotal evidence of people meeting with success in resorting to such measures, it's not known how many people are actually doing more harm than good.

More information: Autoimmunity: The worm returns, *Nature* 491, 183–185, [doi:10.1038/491183a](https://doi.org/10.1038/491183a)

Abstract

Joel V. Weinstock explains why several clinical trials are deliberately infecting people with helminths to treat autoimmune diseases.

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