

# Leeches help save woman's ear after pit bull mauling

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Restored ear. Photo:  
The New England  
Journal of Medicine

(HealthDay)—A pit bull attack in July 2013 left a 19-year-old woman with her left ear ripped from her head, leaving an open wound. After preserving the ear, the surgical team started with a reconnection of a 0.3 millimeter-thick arterial branch. Stephen Sullivan, M.D., M.P.H., an assistant professor of plastic surgery at Brown University in Providence, R.I., joined his colleague Helena Taylor, M.D., Ph.D., to present the case in the April 17 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Sullivan and Taylor placed the [leeches](#) onto the side of the woman's head. "They suck and drain away the blood," Sullivan told *HealthDay*, "so more fresh blood can finally get in. And they do it quite efficiently.

And while they're at it, it gives the body the time to make its own new veins, which is something that the body can do very efficiently as well. So the goal is to use the leeches as a temporary drainage system, until the patient can regenerate their own drainage system." Still, Sullivan described the entire process as "touch and go."

"I was hopeful, but at the same time this is not a commonly performed procedure," he noted. "The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved leeches in 2004 for all sorts of amputation situations, with a detached finger probably being the most common type of scenario. But still, I would say that it's been done less than 50 times around the world." After 17 days the leeches were finally removed, and the patient's own ear was surgically reattached. The result: a full recovery of the ear's function and appearance.

"Her hearing was totally unaffected by this," Sullivan said. "So I would say this is a perfect example of bio-inspiration, in which we take an organic talent and apply it successfully."

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