**WHAT ARE THEY?**
- Threadworms are a common parasitic nematode (*Enterobius vermicularis*).
- They measure from 2.5 to 12mm and look like white cotton threads.
- Threadworms are harmless but can be very irritating, disturbing sleep.

**LIFE CYCLE**
- Female threadworms produce large numbers of tiny eggs, which are invisible to the naked eye.
- The eggs are ingested from contaminated hands or food.
- They hatch in the intestine and quickly develop into adult worms.
- The female worms lay their eggs in the perianal area at night.
- The female secretes mucus, which causes intense itching and promotes scratching by the host.
- Reinfection occurs when eggs are ingested from contaminated hands.

**SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS**
- The main symptom is itching of the anal area, especially at night.
- Some people have no symptoms.
- Diagnosis is confirmed if threadworms are seen in the perianal area or in the stool.

**INCIDENCE/PREVALENCE**
- Threadworms most commonly affect children 5–10 years old but they may affect the whole family.
- Higher rates of infection can occur in residential institutions such as children’s homes.
- In a general practice of 10,000 patients, about 40 consultations a year are due to threadworm (McCormick et al, 1991).

**TREATMENT**
- Good hygiene measures should be encouraged in all family members.
- All family members should be treated simultaneously.
- Mebendazole acts by inhibiting the uptake of glucose by the worms.
- Piperazine blocks the neurotransmitter acetylcholine in the worm, paralysing it.
- Scratching of the perianal region can lead to excoriated skin and secondary infection.

**NURSING IMPLICATIONS**
- It is not necessary to exclude children from school.
- Where diagnosis is uncertain, a sticky-tape test may be useful.

**PREVENTION**
- Keep nails cut short.
- Wash hands and scrub nails after each visit to the toilet.
- Wash hands and scrub nails before each meal.
- Disinfect toilet seat, toilet handle, and door handle regularly.
- Wear pyjamas or pants in bed.

**COMPLICATIONS**
- In rare cases the adult worms can spread to other organs and lead to complications such as: vulvovaginitis, salpingitis, urinary tract infection or hepatitis.

**DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSIS**
- Perianal itching in adults may be due to irritation by deodorants, tight nylon underclothes, haemorrhoids, perianal eczema, and pruritus ani.
- Roundworms may occasionally be passed in the stool (adult worms are approximately 30cm long).
- Tapeworm infection often only becomes evident when segments are passed in the stool – these are called proglottids and are ribbon-like, approximately 5cm long and, unlike threadworms, do not move.

**REFERENCES**