Ethiopian International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

pISSN:2349-5707 Volume:12,Issue 12,December-2025 eISSN:2349-5715

WATER- AND FOOD-BORNE HELMINTHIASES AND THEIR PREVENTION

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Abstract: Helminthiases transmitted through contaminated water and food remain a significant global health challenge, particularly in regions with inadequate sanitation and limited access to safe drinking water. These infections are caused by parasitic worms from the phyla Nematoda, Platyhelminthes, and Acanthocephala. Understanding their biology, life cycles, routes of transmission, and genetic diversity is essential for developing effective prevention strategies. This article summarizes major water and food-borne helminths, their pathogenic mechanisms, and evidence-based preventive measures.

Keywords: Hemodynamics, Circulatory System, Computational Modeling, Clinical Prognosis, Biofluid Dynamics, Cardiovascular Simulation, Blood Flow, Biophysical Analysis

Introduction

Helminths are multicellular eukaryotic parasites that infect millions of people worldwide. Many helminth infections are associated with the ingestion of contaminated water, raw or undercooked meat, fish, or unwashed vegetables. Their ability to survive harsh environmental conditions, adapt genetically to human hosts, and manipulate host immunity contributes to persistent disease burden. From a biological and genetic perspective, helminths show remarkable variability, enabling survival across different ecological niches.

Main body

Water- and food-borne helminths constitute a major group of parasitic organisms capable of infecting humans through contaminated water, raw or improperly cooked food, and unwashed agricultural produce. Among these parasites, nematodes, cestodes and trematodes are of particular medical importance. Nematodes such as Ascaris lumbricoides and Trichuris trichiura infect humans following ingestion of food contaminated with soil containing embryonated eggs, while Dracunculus medinensis spreads through drinking water harboring infected copepods. Species of Anisakis pose a risk when raw or undercooked fish is consumed. Cestodes, including Taenia saginata, Taenia solium and Diphyllobothrium latum, are transmitted through consumption of raw or insufficiently cooked beef, pork or fish containing larval forms. Trematodes such as Fasciola hepatica infect individuals through aquatic plants, while Clonorchis sinensis is commonly acquired via raw fish. Schistosoma species represent a unique waterborne threat because their free-swimming cercariae directly penetrate the human skin during contact with infested water.

pISSN:2349-5707 Volume:12,Issue 12,December-2025 eISSN:2349-5715

The biological success of these helminths is largely attributable to their remarkable environmental and genetic adaptations. Their eggs and larvae possess multilayered protective envelopes composed of chitin, proteins and lipids, enabling survival in diverse environmental conditions, including chlorinated water. Many helminths secrete immunomodulatory molecules that mimic host cytokines, interfere with antigen presentation or suppress T lymphocyte activity, thereby allowing long-term persistence within the host. Genomic studies further reveal that helminths display high mitochondrial mutation rates, frequent gene duplication and significant levels of recombination, all of which enhance their adaptability and facilitate continued transmission in human populations.

Clinically, helminth infections manifest through a wide spectrum of symptoms. Gastrointestinal helminths such as Ascaris and hookworms commonly cause abdominal pain, diarrhea, nutrient malabsorption and anemia. Systemic complications may arise in more severe infections: Taenia solium can lead to neurocysticercosis characterized by seizures, Schistosoma infections can result in portal hypertension and bladder cancer, and Fasciola hepatica may inflict significant damage on liver parenchyma and bile ducts. Chronic helminthiases frequently impair nutrient absorption, contributing to growth retardation and cognitive deficits in children, especially in regions with repeated exposure.

Transmission of these infections occurs through multiple routes. Waterborne transmission often results from drinking water contaminated with helminth eggs or larvae, ingestion of aquatic plants carrying infective stages or direct skin penetration by cercariae during contact with infested freshwater sources. Foodborne transmission is linked to raw or undercooked meat, fish and unwashed vegetables exposed to contaminated soil, as well as improper storage practices that allow parasite survival.

Effective prevention requires a comprehensive public health strategy. Ensuring water safety through boiling, filtration, chlorination and protection of water reservoirs from fecal contamination significantly reduces risk. Food hygiene measures such as thorough cooking of meat and fish, freezing fish to eliminate Anisakis larvae, and meticulous washing of vegetables are essential. Improved sanitation, including construction of latrines, proper wastewater management and control of intermediate hosts like snails and copepods, further disrupts transmission cycles. Public education plays a vital role by promoting awareness of the dangers of consuming raw fish or untreated water and reinforcing safe food-handling practices. Modern approaches also integrate genetic and molecular surveillance, including PCR-based detection of helminth DNA in water sources, monitoring of genetic variants associated with drug resistance and the development of genome-guided vaccines and treatments.

Collectively, these combined strategies represent the most effective means of reducing the global burden of water- and food-borne helminthiases and mitigating their long-term health consequences.

Conclusion

Water- and food-borne helminthiases remain a major public health concern, particularly in developing regions. Understanding helminth biology, genetics, life cycle dynamics, and environmental resilience is essential for designing effective prevention strategies. Sustainable control requires a combined approach involving safe water supply, improved sanitation, food safety measures, and molecular surveillance.

pISSN:2349-5707 Volume:12,Issue 12,December-2025 eISSN:2349-5715

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