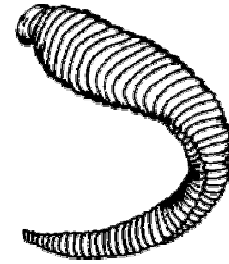


## Leeches

- **Leeches** are annelids (segmented worms) comprising the subclass **Hirudinea**.
- There are freshwater, terrestrial, and marine leeches.
- Like the Oligochaeta, they share the presence of a clitellum thickened glandular section of the body wall in earthworms and some other annelids, that secretes a viscid sac in which the eggs are deposited.
- Like earthworms, leeches are hermaphrodites (having both male and female sex organs). Some, but not all, leeches are hematophagous.( feed on blood).The European Medical Leech (*Hirudo medicinalis*) has been used for clinical bloodletting for thousands of years, although most leeches do not feed on human blood, but instead prey on small invertebrates, which they eat whole.
- A leech's body is composed of 34 segments. They all have an anterior (oral) sucker formed from the first six segments of their body, which is used to connect to a host for feeding, and also release an anesthetic to prevent the host from feeling the leech. They use a combination of mucus and suction (caused by concentric muscles in those six segments) to stay attached and secrete an anti-clotting enzyme, hirudin, into the host's blood stream.
- Some species of leech will nurture their young, while providing food, transport, and protection, which is unusual behavior amongst annelids.
- An overabundance of leeches in a water body may indicate an absence of big fish, which are their natural predators.



## Leech Facts

1. There are 650 known species of leeches.
2. The largest leech discovered measured 18 inches.
3. About one fifth of leech species live in the sea, where they feed on fish.
4. The leech has 32 brains.
5. Not all leeches are bloodsuckers. Many are predators which eat earthworms, etc.
6. The bite of a leech is painless, due to its own anaesthetic.
7. The leech will gorge itself until it has had its fill and then just fall off.
8. The leech will gorge itself up to five times its body weight.
9. The nervous system of the leech is very similar to the human nervous system and is an enormous benefit to researchers in their quest for the answers to human problems.
10. The nearest relatives of leeches are earthworms.