

Rat Lungworm Myths and Traps

MYTH: No one ever died from Rat Lungworm disease.

People rarely die from Rat Lungworm but it does happen. There have been deaths in Thailand, China and Australia as well as probable Rat Lungworm deaths in Hawaii. More important than the possibility of dying, Rat Lungworm disease causes life transforming disability that can leave victims severely crippled and with chronic pain.

MYTH: If you don't have a headache, you don't have Rat Lungworm disease.

The symptoms of Rat Lungworm disease vary widely and the presentation is often quite different in different patients. Seventy to eighty percent of patients have a significant headache, which means that up to 40% do not and you can miss a quarter of the cases if you rely on headaches to diagnose.

The most frequent symptoms of the disease in children are fever and lethargy, not headache.

MYTH: If you don't know how you got exposed to snails or slugs, you probably don't have the disease.

It is always helpful to have a history of exposure when making the diagnosis, but we are seeing an increasing number of victims who practice good food hygiene and still contract severe disease. Many victims of severe disease never know how they were exposed.

MYTH: Eosinophils on the peripheral blood smear help you make the diagnosis.

The Rat Lungworm parasite spends a limited amount of time in circulation before taking up residence in the central nervous system. Because of this, eosinophils are present for a short time in the peripheral blood and differential blood counts don't help very much. The presence of eosinophilia on a blood smear helps raise your suspicion, but the absence of eosinophils does not help you rule the disease out.

MYTH: There are no treatments for prevention of Rat Lungworm disease if someone has eaten a slug.

Children's Health Queensland Hospital has an established protocol for treatment of patients who have a known ingestion of a snail or slug. This protocol is available on our website on the Rat Lungworm support group page:

www.hilomedicalcenter.org/our-services/support-groups/rat-lungworm-support-group

MYTH: Albendazole treatment will make Rat Lungworm disease worse.

Studies in rats show that albendazole can kill a significant percentage of the parasites if given early and that albendazole by itself has an anti-inflammatory effect. Human studies in Thailand has not shown any worsening of the disease with albendazole treatment. It is advised, however that albendazole only be given concurrently with steroids.