

**Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi**

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Leeching around!

Creatures come in all shapes and sizes. Some are pretty to look at, while others bring forth squeals of disgust. As far as I am concerned, I love all creatures, so the squealing is left to other folks! A creature that elicits strong reactions from people is the tiny leech.

Leeches, no more than an inch long, are found in damp, moist forests, where they will wait patiently for food on the forest floor. "Food" for the leech, is blood-yours, mine or any suitable warm blooded animal! With its head raised, the leech waits patiently, for its meal. Often, it can end up waiting for weeks and months! Once it smells food, the leech is on its way. With a peculiar loopy walk, the leech hurries to "catch" its food. On getting close, it climbs up, unobtrusively. Soon, the leech makes its way onto a juicy part of your flesh. A bite, and it is sucking your blood!



Belonging to the family Hirudinae, leeches have suckers in the front and the back. They secrete an anti-coagulant, hirudin, which ensures that your blood does not coagulate and continues to flow, after the bite. Have fed to its heart's content, the leech drops off, swollen with blood. Leeches can consume ten times its weight in blood! Now, the leech may not feed again for months! Because of the anti-coagulant, even though the leech has dropped off, blood from the bite will continue to flow for a while. Even worse, the bite will itch like blazes, later on!

Leeches are found in moist forests close to Dehradun and Mussoorie in the monsoons. My frequent visits to north east India have hardened me against leeches (or *jooks*, as they also called). In Meghalaya, I encountered the "*haathi jook*" or elephant leech. These leeches were huge; three inches in size, half an inch thick. Fortunately, they feed on the blood of cattle, and not humans. At Namdapha in Arunachal Pradesh, we encountered hundreds of leeches, which were on leaves of trees. These leeches climbed onto us as we brushed past the foliage, resulting in bites on even our faces! I had to deal with a rebellious wife, who refused go proceed any further and only a great deal of cajoling convinced her to keep going!

There are many practical ways of dealing with leeches. Rubbing tobacco leaves on your legs keeps them away. Locals in the forest typically know of some plant's leaves that work as well. The simplest solution is to wear "leech guards", long knee length socks, which prevents the leech from easy access to your bare skin.

The last resort is, of course, to avoid all places that you could find leeches. Unfortunately, this does not work for me, as moist, forested areas are areas that I love!

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Making a difference: Leeches were used to suck infected blood in days gone by! Don't try this today, but you can definitely use nature's healing power to cure common ailments instead of using allopathic medicines. Boiling *Adulsa* (it grows commonly around Dehradun) leaves and consuming the water helps cure the common cold.