




Return of the Worms!

**A parasite makes a family
in Ghana sick.**

Every day a health-care worker named Mr. Kofi sets off to examine people in villages near his home. Kofi lives in Ghana, a country on the west coast of Africa. His job is to help control the guinea worm problem there. He keeps an eye out for people with symptoms of guinea worm disease.

And he hopes he doesn't find any.

Guinea worms are parasites that are found in




parts of Asia and Africa. A parasite is a tiny life-form that infects a host animal. It depends on its host for food and other basic needs. Fleas and ticks are types of parasites. They attach themselves to animals and feed on their blood. Unfortunately, the guinea worm's favorite host is the human body!

People get guinea worm disease by drinking water that's infested with water fleas. The fleas carry guinea worm larvae—the young form of the worm. The larvae escape from the infected person's stomach and burrow into their intestines.

Once the guinea worms are fully grown, they start to make their way out of the body. How do they get out? Through the skin! That's when things get really painful.

People infected with guinea worms suffer terrible pain, itching, and burning as the worms try to exit their bodies. The disease is so painful that its medical name is dracunculiasis. That means “pain caused by little dragons.” And if the worms aren't removed properly, they can cause serious infections.



THESE TWO BOYS live in a small village in Ghana. In that country, 60 percent of guinea worm disease cases occurred in children.

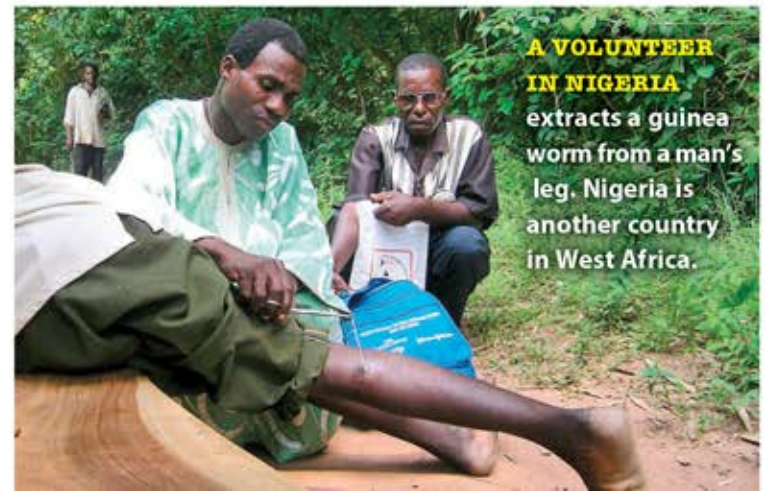


THIS COLORIZED X-RAY OF A TOE shows a guinea worm under the skin. The worm has calcified, or hardened, which can happen if it dies before being removed.

A Family in Trouble

In March 2006, Kofi arrived at the home of the Fusheni family. Seven of the 10 family members were seriously ill. The grandmother's feet were swollen with blisters. She couldn't collect firewood. The parents were too weak to farm the fields. The two young children itched terribly. And the two older boys had open wounds on their legs. They had trouble walking, and they could not go to school.

Kofi knew right away that the Fushenis were infected with guinea worms. But where had the worms come from? And why weren't any other villagers sick?



A VOLUNTEER IN NIGERIA extracts a guinea worm from a man's leg. Nigeria is another country in West Africa.