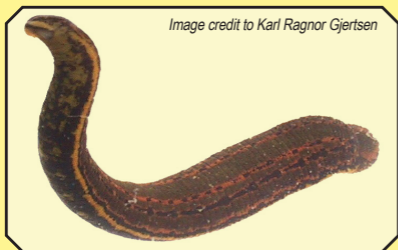


# Macroinvertebrate Fact File 12

## Leeches - sensitivity scale 1-3

- Leeches are segmented worms. A leech has an elongated body that is soft but tough and is usually blackish or brownish. Leeches have very poor vision even though they can have up to 10 pairs of eyes. They are very sensitive to touch. They also have a strong sense of taste. They cannot hear, but are sometimes very sensitive to vibrations. They have 32 brains, one in each segment of their body. Leeches range in length from less than 2.5cm to 40cm or more.
- There are almost 700 species of leeches of which around 100 live in the sea, 90 live on the land and the rest live in freshwater.
- Leeches are important members of aquatic food webs. They are mid-level consumers, eating smaller animals and in turn being eaten by larger predators.
- Some leeches feed mainly on blood, but others eat worms, insect larvae, and other small forms of animal life. Few leeches actually require blood as food, though most will accept this food if the chance arises. It attaches to the host by means of its two suckers and bites through the skin of its victim. Simultaneously, the leech injects an anaesthetic so that its presence is not detected, and an anticoagulant in order for the incision to remain open during the meal. It has three jaws, which work back and forth during the feeding process, which usually lasts about 20 to 40 minutes.
- Leeches only feed about once every six months; this is about how long the blood meal takes to be fully digested.
- Leeches lay eggs in cocoons, and the babies that hatch out look and behave like little adults. They don't change much as they grow, they just get bigger. Leeches that live in habitats that freeze or dry out during part of the year bury themselves in mud and stay dormant until the habitat improves. Most species can mature in a few weeks or months if conditions are good.
- Leeches are used in some medical procedures to remove excess blood from body parts that have been reattached after injury. Also, chemicals that leeches use to prevent blood-clotting have proved to be valuable medicines.



*Image credit to Karl Ragnar Gjertsen*

**A medicinal leech**

## Freshwater Bug Fact File 12

*Collect the fact files, laminate them and put them on to a key ring to produce a macroinvertebrate reference guide.*