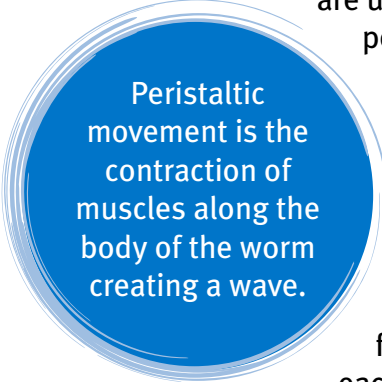


Commonly referred to as worms, animals in the phylum Annelida are characterised by a soft cylindrical body divided into segments.

There are over 20,000 described species, ranging in size from less than 1 mm to 3 m long, such as the giant earthworms found in Gippsland.

Other than the head and tail, body segments are usually similar. The peristaltic movement of most annelids is aided by the flexing of paddle shaped segments or lobes (parapodia) and hairs or bristles (chaetae) projecting from the sides of each segment.



Peristaltic movement is the contraction of muscles along the body of the worm creating a wave.

Annelids can be divided into three groups (classes):

Polychaeta

Mostly marine, polychaete worms are the largest group of annelids including bristle worms, tube worms and scale worms. Diverse in their nature they can be free-moving scavengers and predators, or sedentary (stationary) filter

feeders. Their bodies are variously adapted to their mode of life, usually with parapodia and chaetae on each segment.

Hirudinea

More commonly referred to as leeches, this group of annelids can be found in marine, freshwater and terrestrial environments. The cylindrical bodies of leeches have been flattened, and usually taper towards the head. They have a small sucker surrounding the mouth and a larger sucker at the rear. They lack parapodia and most have no chaetae. The marine species are poorly known but most are external parasites on fish, freshwater species are more likely to be active predators.

Oligochaeta

Oligochaete worms are long, cylindrical animals with highly segmented bodies. They have no large external appendages and the only obvious character is often the clitellum, a swollen band near the anterior end used to secrete a cocoon to encapsulate the eggs. While still possessing chaetae, they are greatly reduced and often can't be seen with the naked eye. Found in terrestrial as well as freshwater and marine environments, this group includes the well-known earthworm.

