

This diverse group of animals includes bryozoans, lace corals and moss animals.

The many marine species of bryozoans are sessile, found attached to a hard substrate such as a reef, but they may also live on marine plants.

Bryozoans are colonial animals. Each individual is known as a zooid, which is usually one millimetre in size or less. Many zooids have a hard box-like wall (or cup) made of calcium carbonate, which forms a hard skeleton. However, some are also soft and flexible and have little or no calcification.

They take on a variety of shapes – they can have flat, encrusting, plant-like or coral-like formations, and are therefore often mistaken for corals or algae.

As most bryozoans are sedentary (can not move) they are suspension feeders, using their tentacles to collect their food. They also produce a distasteful and often toxic chemical to deter predators.

Bryozoans are divided into three groups (classes):

Stenolaemata

This is an ancient and primitive group, with most known species being fossils. Only ten per cent of animals in this group are extant (in existence).

Gymnolaemata

These bryozoans are almost entirely marine species.

Phylactolaemata

These are restricted to freshwater species.

