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## Introduction

Heterakis gallinarum is found in the caeca of chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, grouse, partridges, pheasants and quail and is widespread in floor reared replacement pullets.

## The parasite

Heterakis gallinarum adult worms are small, white worms that are found in the caeca. The male is 7-13mm long and the female 10-15mm long.

## Life cycle

This worm has a direct life cycle. Eggs are laid in the caeca and pass out of the hen's body in an unembryonated form in the faeces. Within two weeks the eggs have become infective. When swallowed they then hatch in the upper intestines and reach the caeca within 24 hours. Initially the worms are associated with the caecal mucosal tissue but after two and a half weeks they are free in the caecal lumens.

The eggs can be ingested by earthworms where they can hatch and live for months. If the earthworm is ingested by a hen infection becomes established.

Heterakis gallinarum can carry the protozoal parasite Histomonas meleagridis, the cause of blackhead in turkeys. Blackhead infection via Heterakis gallinarum and the earthworm is seen from time to time.

## Disease

This worm infestation is characterised by a thickening and inflammation of the caecal walls. In heavy infestations caecal nodules may be seen. This is not very serious as the caeca are not involved in nutrient uptake by the bird.

Probably the most important role for this worm is its role as a carrier of Histomonas meleagridis, which is commonly found in Heterakis gallinarum eggs.

Viable infestations of Heterakis gallinarum are not maintained in turkeys so the risk to flocks of this kind of poultry comes from co-rearing chickens and turkeys, or chicken or pheasant faeces getting into a turkey flock.