

In Germany, Parasites Are Good and GMOs Are Bad



By Alex Berezow — August 7, 2017



Credit: Jasper Lawrence/Wikipedia [1]

The myth that "natural is better" is widespread and pernicious. Though it can manifest in relatively harmless ways (e.g., consuming overpriced organic food), the relentless pursuit of all-things natural can be dangerous or even deadly. It is not an exaggeration to say that society's obsession with natural remedies is itself an illness.

The latest weirdness comes from Germany, which according to [New Scientist](#) [2], is considering approval of parasite eggs as a food additive. After eating the eggs, little worms hatch, and people believe that these worms will cure them of their maladies. Most likely, they won't.

Helminth Therapy: Worms to the Rescue

Like most junk science, there is a hint of truth to the notion that parasites could be beneficial to the human body. The rise of autoimmune disorders in the developed world (but not in the developing world), such as allergies, has been blamed on excessive cleanliness. As a result, it is thought that our immune systems freak out at the lack of microbes and end up attacking our own bodies. This idea, called the [hygiene hypothesis](#) [3], is supported by extensive research.

A logical corollary to the hypothesis is that getting a little dirty is good for our health. Parasites, in particular, may be especially beneficial to those with autoimmune disorders since they probably suppress our immune response. Thus, helminth therapy -- a very pleasant sounding term for "swallowing worm eggs" -- was born. It is not a crackpot scheme; plenty of [serious research](#) [4] suggests it could work. There is even an ongoing clinical trial using [helminth therapy to treat multiple sclerosis](#) [5].

What is a crackpot scheme is allowing people to self-diagnose their medical problems and then to self-medicate with parasite eggs purchased at a grocery store without a doctor's supervision. Yet,

that's precisely what Germany is considering. Why? Because, as the *New Scientist* piece states, parasitic worms are a "natural product and tests had found no ill-effects."

Germany: The Land of Woo

It really should go without saying that self-medicating with a parasitic worm may not be a good idea. Even if the therapy is eventually shown to have benefits for some patients, there is a potential health risk for people who are immunocompromised. And the idea that German regulators could give permission for a company to sell a product like this without at least a doctor's prescription is just plain nuts.

But perhaps this shouldn't be terribly surprising. After all, Germany gave birth to homeopathy. *The Economist* [6] wrote last year, "[H]omeopathy is the closest thing Germany has to a native alternative-medicine tradition... Unusually, Germany gives homeopathy a privileged legal status. Whereas other medicines must meet scientific criteria, homeopathic remedies need not." Germany has also turned its back on nuclear power and [GMOs](#) [7].

In other words, when it comes to medicine, energy, and agriculture, Germans prefer ancient traditions rather than 21st Century technology. *Viel Wissen macht Kopfweh*.

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Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helminthic_therapy#/media/File:Necator_Americanus_L3_x1000_12-2007.jpg

[2] <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2142897-parasitic-worm-eggs-may-soon-be-legally-sold-as-food-in-germany/>

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hygiene_hypothesis

[4] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4374592/>

[5] <https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT00645749>

[6] <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21706550-push-disabuse-germans-homegrown-form-quackery-not-molecule-sense>

[7] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-gmo-idUSKBN12X13S>