

# How the earwig got its name

BY AMR ABDELHAMID

What are earwigs, and how are they connected with the ear? **Amr Abdelhamid** explains the etymology, myths and beliefs behind the pesky creature with the otological name.

**E**arwigs are harmless insects of the order Dermaptera that are amongst the most misunderstood creatures in the world. References indicate that the origin of their naming goes as far back as the beginning of the first millennium, due to superstitious beliefs that they crawl into ears of sleeping people. Some versions even suggested that they lay their eggs and breed, causing deafness or even insanity.

Earwigs are nocturnal herbivorous creatures that prefer living in moist areas. They occasionally creep into houses as they are attracted by the light. They vary in size between 5-50mm and have an outer covering which is dark coloured. They have a pair of horny pliers like tail filaments at the end of their abdomen and thread-like antennae at the front.

According to entomologist May Berenbaum in her book *The Earwig's Tail: A Modern Bestiary of Multi-legged Legends* where she discusses urban legends and scientific explanations about insects, the origin of the earwig myth can be found as early in 11th century medical treatments and originates as far back as Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, which is considered by many scholars as the world's first encyclopaedia [1].

Interestingly, the myth behind earwigs is widespread in Europe and nearly every European language has a similar name for the insect, related to the human ear. The term earwig is derived from Old English 'ēare' which means ear, and 'wicga' which means insect. In German it is called 'ohrwurm' which is earworm. This is because at first sight, it can seem like it has no legs and has wiggly movements resembling a worm. In Hungarian, 'fülbemászó' means ear crawler.

Although these superstitions and myths are considered groundless in the modern world, it is not uncommon that we as ENT clinicians encounter animate foreign bodies in the external ear. In 2021 Kim and colleagues published an interesting case report with video demonstration of an earwig crawling in the external auditory canal.

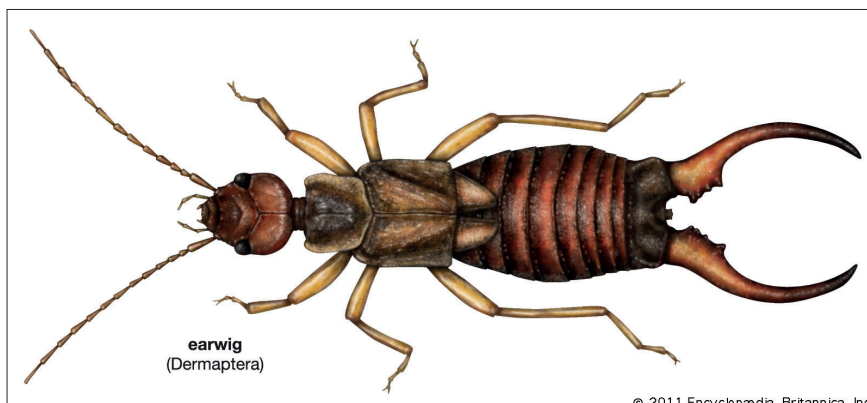


Figure 1. Earwig.

Their plier-like tail filaments also gave them the name of 'perceoreille' in French and 'ohrenkneifer' in German, meaning ear pincher, referring to another myth that they can pinch human skin. However, this is very unlikely as earwigs are not able to permeate through a superficial layer of skin; if anything, they will just pinch very slightly. The more likely explanation is the similarity of the earwig's pliers or pincers to the small instrument used by goldsmiths to pierce ears, which is termed 'perceoreille' in French.

Other explanations of how the insect got its name include a theory by Frank Cowan in 1865, a lawyer journalist and physician, suggesting that the earwig's hindwing unfolded resembles a human ear.

The fact remains that earwigs are relatively harmless and the likelihood of entering the human ear is very low, with only few cases reported in literature. However, the origin of this insect's name will always be associated with theories, myths and superstitious beliefs.

#### Reference

1. Berenbaum M. *The earwig's tail: A modern bestiary of multi-legged legends*. Harvard University Press; 2009:9-14.
2. Jeong H, Shin JE, Kim CH. Earwig Crawling in the Ear: Myth or Truth. *Cureus* 2021;**13**(5):e14827.

#### Further reading

1. Brandstaetter F. Superstitious beliefs about earwigs (Dermaptera). *Acta Musei Silesiae. Scientiae Naturales* 2020;**69**(1):47-50.



Figure 2. Earwig in the external auditory canal.

Image © 2021 Jeong et al [2]. Scan this QR code to watch the video.



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