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Some worms like it really, really hot, study finds

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By Maggie Fox, Health and Science Correspondent

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A species of worm that thrives on undersea hot-water vents prefers the hottest water possible, choosing to live at temperatures that kill other animals, researchers reported on Thursday.

Their unique abilities to withstand hot water shooting like a geyser from hydrothermal openings may help the stalk-like worms prey on bacteria that other animals cannot reach, the researchers report in Friday's issue of the journal *Science*.

The tiny worms, known scientifically as *Paralvinella sulfincola*, chose water heated to 122 F (50 degrees C) and made brief forays into water as hot as 131 degrees F (55 degrees C), Peter Girguis of Harvard University in Massachusetts and Raymond Lee of Washington State University reported.

"To our knowledge, every other vent organism down there dies at temperatures way below 50 and 55" Celsius, Girguis said in a telephone interview.

The worms live on underwater vents found at depths of 1.4 miles off the Pacific coast of Washington. They are studied and collected using submarines such as the deep-sea ALVIN submersible, or robots.

They belong to a group known as polychaetes and build tubes made out of mucus but can move around freely. They resemble tiny red palm trees, with frond-like red gills.

Many different animals live on the deep undersea vents, not merely tolerating the sulfur, heat and pressure but thriving in it. They eat the bacteria that can live in much higher temperatures than more complex animals.

The water pours out of the vents at temperatures far above the boiling point but it quickly cools in the chilly sea water. Because of the conditions, it is difficult to know precisely which temperatures the animals can tolerate. [Continued...](#)

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