



Sea cucumbers

What are they?

Sea cucumbers belong to a family of animals called Echinodermata. *Echinodermata* means "spiny skin." Other animals in this family include sand dollars and starfish (sometimes called sea stars). The hairy, or common, sea cucumber is one of two kinds of sea cucumbers that make the Chesapeake Bay their home.

What do they look like?

Some people think that sea cucumbers look like short, fat cucumbers. That's probably how they got their name. Others think they look like hairy rocks. Their brown bodies are around four – five inches long and two inches wide.



Photo Source: Gerald and Buff Corsi, Cal Images

They have ten tentacles that extend from their mouths. These tentacles sweep through the water, gathering food. Sea cucumbers can also bring these tentacles inside their bodies if they sense danger. If they ever lose a tentacle, they can regrow a replacement in about three weeks.

Tube feet on sides of sea cucumbers' bodies help them move around. They creep along the bottom of the Bay using them. They also use their tube feet to cover themselves up with sediment from the Bay bottom, hiding from predators.

Where can you find them?

Sea cucumbers are often found in the deeper Bay waters in areas where the water has a high salt content. They live on the bottom of the Bay.

How do they behave?

Sea cucumbers move like caterpillars, using their tube feet to hold on as they contract and expand.

Generally, they are nocturnal animals, doing most of their hunting and moving at night.

These creatures have one very unusual habit. When they are startled by a predator (or picked up by a person), they will spit out water, just like a sea squirt. If they get really upset, they will even throw up parts of their own body.

Sometimes these sea cucumbers slip between rocks to hide. To do this, they use collagen (a kind of protein that strengthens connective tissue) in their skin. The collagen can be either soft or hard. Sea cucumbers slip between rocks when their collagen is soft. Then their collagen hardens so they can't be removed. When they want to move out of their hiding places, their collagen becomes soft again.

What do they eat?

Sea cucumbers eat dead or decaying plants and animals (detritus) that floats in the water near them or lies on the bottom of the Bay.

What eats them?

Some of the predators that eat sea cucumbers include sea turtles, crustaceans such as crabs, and many fish.

Creature Feature

Sea cucumbers can also be eaten by humans. Chinese cooks use dried sea cucumbers to make stews. Some people think they add texture to the dishes, but not really any flavor.

