

# Creep into the Deep: Discovering Deep-Sea Coral

**SEAMAIL™**

TO: Virtual Deep-Sea Science Team  
FROM: Jake, the SeaDog  
SUBJECT: What is Coral?

Hello Virtual Science Team,

Coral is an animal.

When you see a coral reef, you're actually looking at hundreds, or even thousands of tiny creatures.

Each coral animal is called a polyp. Coral polyps live together in a group or colony.

There are "hard" corals and "soft" corals. Hard coral polyps create a rock-like shell (made of calcium carbonate) around its soft body. Soft coral polyps don't form shells.

Hard coral colonies join together to build reefs. The reefs can be enormous. For example, the Great Barrier Reef is so big it can be seen from space.

Corals grow in every ocean. There are more than 6,000 different species of coral. They live in shallow water, as well as water so deep that light doesn't reach it. About half of the species are deep-sea corals.

Corals are related to sea anemones. They have small, soft, tube-shaped bodies that are usually less than half an inch (1.5 cm) in size. But some can be several inches (cm) across.

They have a mouth at one end with tentacles around it. The tentacles gather bits of food from the water. Like their cousins, jellyfish and sea anemones, a coral's tentacles have stinging cells to help protect itself.

Some corals look like branching trees or a spiral whip. Some are fan shaped. Some are feather shaped. Some corals even look like brains. Corals add beauty to the ocean, and more importantly, they create homes and food for other animals.

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Illustration by Paul Lopez

