

Girl nearly goes blind after parasite in dog mess that travelled from her stomach to her eyeball

- **Millie Knight ingested the parasite spread by animal faeces**
- **Called Toxocara, it can contaminate the soil in gardens, parks and even playgrounds**
- **It lay dormant for several years before almost blinding her in her left eye in just three weeks**
- **But she has refused to let her partial sight stand in her way and hopes to ski for the GB Winter Paralympics team**

By Claire Bates

When Susan Knight noticed her baby daughter had an irritation in one of her eyes, she assumed it was due to a pre-existing squint. But when Millie was three, surgeons correcting her eye condition noticed scarring on her right retina.

After several trips to Great Ormond Street, Millie was diagnosed with the rare condition known as Toxocariasis - which she had caught after ingesting the eggs of the Roundworm parasite, Toxocara.

There are around 50 cases reported each year in the UK, usually in young children.



Millie, 13, has been on antibiotics since a parasite infection affected her vision. Undaunted, she now hopes to be part of the Team GB Winter Paralympic Ski team in the future

Toxocara is found in the faeces of dogs and cats, and can contaminate the soil in gardens, parks and even playgrounds.

If accidentally ingested, the roundworm eggs hatch into larvae that penetrate through the walls of the digestive tract and in rare cases can migrate to the eyes and cause serious sight problems.

Millie, who lives near Canterbury and had grown up on a farm, had spent her young life surrounded by animals and picked up the parasite when she was one.

However, in her case the infection had remained dormant for several years and she had displayed no symptoms. Then when Millie was six the condition reactivated - unusually this time in her left eye. She experienced bouts of

feeling poorly but it wasn't until her teacher noticed a decline in her sight at school that doctors realised what must have happened.

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Her mother said: 'We looked after all manner of animals when Millie was young, from sheep to household cats and dogs. 'Millie first contracted the condition at around the age of one, which remained undercover for years until it finally attacked when she was six. During a three week period, Millie had lost a lot of her sight. 'We were first referred to an optometrist and then swiftly to Great Ormond St Hospital, as Millie's vision became worse.

'Millie ended up having to make weekly visits to Moorfields Eye Hospital, where the infected eye was treated with steroids. She has been on antibiotics ever since.'

Millie has scarring in her central vision and is classified as B2 in disability terms - a stage between being blind and visually impaired.

TOXOCARIASIS: THE **PARASITE THAT CAN DESTROY VISION**

Toxocariasis is a rare infection caused by roundworm parasites (Toxocara). It is spread from animals to humans via their infected faeces.

Ocular larva migrans is the least common but potentially most serious type of toxocariasis. The condition can develop if the roundworm parasites move into the eyes. The main symptoms of ocular larva migrans are blurred or cloudy vision and irritation of the eyes. Left untreated, ocular larva migrans can result in permanent vision loss, although only one eye is usually affected.

It affects around 50 people a year and usually affects young children.

Treatment involves taking medication to kill the parasites. Most people will quickly make a full recovery and won't experience any long-term complications.

Source: NHS

But Millie wouldn't let the condition hold her back.

Her mother said: 'She was as cool as cucumber and has coped so well. I'm very proud of her.' Millie had gone on a skiing holiday in France just before her sight deteriorated and was determined to continue with the sport.

'She really took to it and loved it,' Susan said.

'It is difficult as she can't see much of what she's skiing on and other people.

'But she never thinks of it as difficult, as she doesn't know any different. She also has headphones so she can talk to me while she's skiing.'

Now 13, Millie has just returned from Austria, where she has been training with the Team GB Winter Paralympic Ski team.

She hopes to compete in the 2018 games, which will be held in South Korea.

The best way to help prevent the rare condition is for dog owners to not only clear up after their pets but to regularly worm them as well.

Maggie Fisher from the European Scientific Counsel of Companion Animal Parasites, explains: 'The Roundworm (Toxocara) lives in animal faeces but can survive even once owners have cleaned up after their pets.

'In fact, Toxocara is such a resilient parasite it takes bleach and plenty of elbow grease to eradicate it completely.

'The only way to be sure your pet is not spreading this parasite is to worm regularly – this can be undertaken on a monthly basis to break the life cycle of the parasite.'

However, research from the 'It's a Jungle Out There' report from Bayer Animal Health revealed that 75 per cent of owners do not regularly worm their pet, while half don't clear up after their dogs.

For further advice about preventing pet parasites at www.itsajungle.co.uk