

## Never turn a blind eye to the threat of zoonotic disease.

*Jennifer Ronan never imagined that taking her son Christopher to a neighborhood playground could make him sick. Here's her story:*



*It is thought that Ronan's son Christopher contracted toxocariasis, which led to ocular larva migrans, in a public park like this one.*

Four years ago, I learned that the most innocent of places can hold hidden dangers if you are unaware. I was proud of the care I gave my son. We ate healthy foods and had yearly checkups. "You have a healthy son," the doctor always told me.

When he was four years old, I took Christopher to the ophthalmologist for his first eye exam. I watched the ophthalmologist begin the exam, and within minutes it was evident to me that Christopher could not see out of his left eye. The doctor then confirmed the devastating news that Christopher was, in fact, partially blind in his left eye.

Two days later, Christopher was diagnosed with toxocariasis by one of the best retinal specialists in the country. He confirmed that Christopher had contracted ocular larva migrans, a serious health condition in which one or more roundworm larvae become trapped in the eye, causing a dense scar in the retina.

The doctor conducted a series of tests, but he was unable to determine the exact source of disease transmission. Ben, our black Labrador, and Maggie, our yellow Lab, were eliminated as possible infection sources, as was our calico kitty, Amelia – all of our pets were on a heartworm preventive

that treats and controls roundworm and hookworm. After many questions about our daily routines, the ophthalmologists concluded that Christopher had contracted ocular larva migrans from playing in a public sandbox or playground. The park had a sandbox and swing set, and a safe green lawn for soccer games – but it was a place that could easily harbor roundworm-infected animal waste. Not once, in all the hours Christopher and I spent building castles in the sandbox, did I consider this neighborhood play area a potential hazard for our son.

Before Christopher's infection we'd heard of roundworms – and we knew that they could be transmitted from pets to people. But we didn't know or even suspect the serious consequences of a zoonotic disease. Christopher's experience changed all that. Now, our goal is to educate others about the dangers and the prevention of toxocariasis.

I urge you, as veterinary professionals, to tell pet owners about the risks of these diseases and how to avoid transmission. Talk to them about preventing roundworms and hookworms and scooping their dog's waste. Please help them to be aware of the dangers of zoonotic diseases and the importance of protecting pets, their families, and others.

When I talk to people about toxocariasis, some say, "Roundworm infection is so rare. Why should we even focus on this topic?" But I think the answer is clear: Better-informed pet owners can help transform roundworm infection from a rare condition to a nonexistent condition.

Today, Christopher is a normal kindergartner, learning to write his letters and numbers and doing karate. However, his lost vision will never be restored. We should do everything we can to prevent zoonotic disease from hurting our children and risking the health of our communities.