Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

A woman found 14 worms hiding in her eye after it got red and scratchy — showing that a new species is capable of infecting humans

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Kevin Loria, February 13, 2018

The idea of worms crawling out of a human eye is so horrific that when FX used such an image on billboards to promote the show "The Strain," it had to take them down because [passers-by found them too disturbing](https://www.ew.com/article/2014/06/27/fx-the-strain-gross-billboards/).

For Abby Beckley, an Oregon resident, that situation was all too real.

Beckley realized something was wrong in the summer of 2016 while working on a salmon-fishing boat in Alaska — something was making her eye feel scratchy and irritated.

After about a week of irritation, which she thought might be caused by a stray eyelash, Beckley took a close look in the mirror and found the real culprit.

What she pulled out was a wriggling, translucent worm, about a half-inch long. And it wasn't the only one in her eye.

Local urgent-care clinics and an eye doctor couldn't figure out what was wrong, though they removed another four worms from her left eye, [according to The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2018/02/12/she-thought-the-weird-sensation-was-a-stray-eyelash-it-was-eye-worms/).

Beckley flew home to Oregon and [met with doctors](https://news.ohsu.edu/2018/02/12/ohsu-cdc-unravel-mysterious-eye-infection) at Oregon Health and Science University's Emergency Department. Soon she was able to feel the worms' movement and alert the doctors, who were astounded by what they saw.

They planned a call among physicians on an infectious-disease hotline. Erin Bonura, an assistant professor at the OHSU School of Medicine who helped write [a new case report](https://www.ajtmh.org/content/journals/10.4269/ajtmh.17-0870) describing Beckley's eye-worm infection, said doctors on the call were mystified.

"This patient has worms coming out of her eye," Bonura recalled hearing. "What are we going to do?"

The team at OHSU sent a sample to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Because Beckley was able to pull the worms out of her eye better than the doctors were, she continued to remove worms from her eye for the next few weeks, [a news release from the university](https://news.ohsu.edu/2018/02/12/ohsu-cdc-unravel-mysterious-eye-infection) says.

Doctors assuaged some of her fears when they told her the worms would remain on the surface of her eye and not tunnel through to her brain.

"I was really thankful to be linked up with Dr. Bonura," Beckley said, according to the OHSU news release. "Dr. Bonura was so willing to just talk with me and was really empathetic to what I was going through as the person who had this thing in her eye."

At the CDC, ongoing detective work has revealed something surprising.

There have been only a handful of eye-worm infections in humans in the US, all by the species Thelazia californiensis. But the worms in Beckley's eye were from the species Thelazia gulosa, which had not been known to infect humans.

The worms typically infect cattle when flies carrying them land to feed on tears. The case report says doctors think Beckley may have been infected by a fly that landed on her eye while she was riding horses or fishing near a region of Oregon where cattle farming occurs.

"Previously, it was thought that there were only two different species of these (Thelazia) eye worms that infected humans worldwide," Richard Bradbury, the lead author of the study who works with the CDC's Division of Parasitic Diseases and Malaria, said in [a separate news release](https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2018-02/b-owf020718.php). "Now, we have to add Thelazia gulosa, a third one, to the list."

In all, 14 worms were pulled from Beckley's eye, the last one on August 30, 2016. She told The Post she wanted people to know that as rare and scary as her situation was, everything got resolved in the end.

Unlike most animals that eye-worms can affect, people can remove them, so cases don't usually result in serious damage, Bradbury says. And in some cases, antiparasitic medications can help.

Still, eye-worms can scratch the cornea and cause vision problems in some cases, though not in Beckley's.

"Infections from Thelazia worms mostly happen in animals, and humans are just incidental hosts," Bonura said. "This is incredibly interesting, and I'm sure it might make some people squeamish, but it's not something people should worry about."