River Blindness

Where there is a river, there is also life. Humans have always relied on rivers for survival. But in some regions, rivers bring a life of despair. They are the breeding ground for blackflies, which carry the worm that causes Onchocerciasis, commonly known as River Blindness.

River Blindness begins with a bite from a blackfly. Once the larvae have grown into adult worms, the worms have their own generation of larvae, which begin to migrate in the person's body. They travel everywhere — the skin, organs, and the eyes.

The itch begins when the larvae begin to move under the skin. The itch is restless and sufferers usually don't have ways to relieve it. The movement and the death of these larvae cause severe itching, lesions, and skin discolouring for the person. Sometimes the person will get eye lesions, resulting in blindness.

Eyes may be the windows to the soul, but eyes are also the doors to survival for many people. River Blindness tends to be endemic in regions where people farm for a living. Without their eyesight, they have a hard time with working on the farms to sell their crops or even grow enough food to feed their families.

River Blindness can be treated with medication before the blindness happens. However, many of the regions endemic for this disease have poor infrastructure or weak health systems that do not allow for a fast and effective delivery of the treatment to all people in need. Fortunately, there has been a strong international effort into controlling River Blindness through programs where populations are treated on a large scale.

120 million people are at risk for this disease worldwide, with 96% of them in sub-Saharan Africa. A staggering 120,000 people in Africa are blind because they did not receive treatment early enough. Some countries that have managed to stop the transmission of River Blindness include Columbia and Mexico, but there are still many more to go before the disease can be considered a problem of the past.