PARASITES have their own family planning

MALARIA parasites send out ‘sons’ to spread disease when under attack. Scottish scientists have discovered that the tropical disease, which kills up to three million people every year, sends male spawn to overcome ‘difficult’ conditions. And experts at Edinburgh University believe the breakthrough could prove vital in the fight against the disease. The discovery shows that malaria parasites (pictured) are more sophisticated than previously thought. Their ability to respond to environmental and social changes is traditionally associated with more complex life forms like insects, birds and mammals. The single-celled parasites usually produce more female offspring than male, because all ‘girls’ are expected to find mates and continue the spread of the disease. However, this changes when the microscopic ‘parents’, which multiply within red blood cells, are under attack from a person’s immune system. Researchers say this increases the chance that the genes will be passed on to cause fever, chills, nausea, coma and death.

Dr Sarah Reece said: ‘We have long suspected that malaria parasites adjust their production of males and females to ensure their spread, and we have now shown this is the case. We hope that, by understanding the family planning strategy of these parasites, ways can be found to stop the spread of malaria.’