

# A Parasite Carried By Cats Could Increase Suicide Risk

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What's the link between cats and madness?

There's fresh evidence that cats can be a threat to your mental health.

To be fair, it's not kitties themselves that are the problem, but a parasite they carry called *Toxoplasma gondii*.

A study of more than 45,000 Danish women found that those infected with this feline parasite were 1.5 times more likely to attempt suicide than women who weren't infected.

That's not a huge increase, but it's probably too big to have been caused by chance, says [Teodor Postolache](#), a University of Maryland psychiatrist and senior author of [the paper](#), which was published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

Still, the absolute risk of suicide remains very small. Fewer than 1,000 of the women attempted any sort of self-directed violence during the 30-year study span. And just seven committed suicide.

But this isn't the first time *T. gondii* infection, or toxoplasmosis, has been associated with behavioral changes in people, Postolache says. Previous studies have shown links to [schizophrenia](#), bipolar disorder, and even the chance that a person will get in an [automobile accident](#).

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The *T. gondii* parasite lives in the intestines of cats. Cat owners can become infected when they change a litter box, Postolache says. But he says people are more likely to be infected when they eat vegetables or meat that are raw or undercooked.

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"People should not give their cats away" because of this study, Postolache says.

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Scientists still aren't sure how the parasite affects a person's brain, he says. But in rodents, it causes cysts to form in areas of the brain involved in behavior.

A study of rats also found that infection caused them to [lose their fear of cats](#) and become attracted to the odor of cat urine. That behavioral change would increase the chance that a rat would be eaten by a cat — allowing the parasite to get into the cat's intestine, which is the only place it can reproduce sexually.

The parasite doesn't benefit much from infecting a human, since cats don't eat people very often. So humans are probably just "collateral damage" from the parasites' effort to infect smaller animals, says [Robert Yolken](#), an infectious disease expert at Johns Hopkins University.

Yolken says he owns two cats and that "the benefits outweigh the risks."

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