

The truth about toxoplasmosis: the kitchen more likely source than your cat

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By [Monique Balas | For The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

A new study linking toxoplasmosis infection to suicide has some health experts and feline advocates concerned that cats may suffer unfairly as a result.

The study, [published this month in the Archives of General Psychiatry](#), found that women infected with *Toxoplasma gondii* were one-and-a-half times more likely to try to hurt themselves than uninfected women.

Dr. Teodor Postolache and his colleagues at the [University of Maryland](#) studied 45,788 women in Denmark between 1992 and 1995 and concluded that the higher levels of antibodies in the blood reacting to *T. gondii* (the single-celled parasite that causes toxoplasmosis) directly correlated with a higher risk of suicide.

Because contaminated cat litter is one way toxoplasmosis can be transmitted, this news prompted some media outlets to publish stories connecting cat ownership and suicide.

"Our concern is that because it has been sensationalized and interpreted as, 'Your cat can make you sick,' that really is missing the most dangerous part of toxoplasmosis and human infestation," says Dr. Theresa Cornwell of [Cat Care Professionals](#) in Lake Oswego. "You're much less likely to get toxoplasmosis from your cat as you are from fruits and vegetables or meat that is contaminated."

How toxoplasmosis is transmitted

"People tend to forget that the consumption of uncooked or partly cooked meat can be perhaps a more significant source of infection for toxoplasmosis," agrees state public health veterinarian Dr. Emilio DeBess.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) cite toxoplasmosis as the third-leading cause of food-borne illness and death. Half of the 750 deaths attributed to toxoplasmosis each year are believed to be caused by eating contaminated meat, according to the CDC. People can also contract it by drinking contaminated water; not washing your hands after gardening or eating unwashed fruits or vegetables; congenitally from a mother to an unborn child and through an organ transplant or blood transfusion.

It's true that toxoplasmosis can also indeed be spread through cat litter. However, a series of factors must be in place in order for that to happen.

First, the cat must have been exposed to the *T. gondii* parasite at one point. Cats usually contract the parasite from infected rats or mice, so indoor cats are at much less of a risk.

To give you an idea of how prevalent the disease is locally, an unpublished study found that 14 of 183 rats (or about 8 percent) in Multnomah County between 2009 and 2011 tested positive for toxoplasmosis, DeBess says.

Secondly, cats only shed the parasite in their feces for a period of up to several weeks after infection, so you would have to be exposed during that time.

Thirdly, the eggs aren't infectious until they've been out of the cat's body for one to five days.

That's why cleaning the cat box every day – twice if you can – can greatly eliminate the risk of contracting it.

The chances of all those factors lining up are slim.

“The possibility of that perfect storm happening to somebody is quite unlikely,” DeBess says. “I’m not going to say it’s not going to happen, but it’s quite unlikely.”

The truth is, many of us may be infected with toxoplasmosis and never know it. A healthy person's immune system usually keeps it from causing illness.

More than 60 million people in the United States may be infected with toxoplasmosis, according to the CDC, and an estimated one-third to half of the human population worldwide.

DeBess points out that it's much more common in other parts of the world, including Europe, where the study took place.

Most healthy people will never be aware that they're infected, although some people may develop flu-like symptoms, such as swollen lymph glands or muscle aches. Severe cases can cause vision problems or brain damage.

Similarly, most infected cats will never show any symptoms.

The people who are most at risk are people with a compromised immune system and pregnant women who risk passing it to their unborn child, especially in their first trimester. In these cases, it can be quite serious.

“It causes congenital infections that usually can show up multiple ways,” DeBess says. “The baby can have water in the brain or eye problems.”

An estimated 400 to 4,000 cases of congenital toxoplasmosis occur each year in the United States, according to the CDC.

The *T. gondii* parasite has been linked to changes in the brain in the past. Czech researcher Jaroslav Flegr has connected it with schizophrenia and even higher risks of car crashes, and it has also been found to cause rats to lose their fear of cats.

Ultimately, cat advocates recognize that toxoplasmosis – and suicide – are serious concerns, but they hope people won't use the recent headlines as an excuse to get rid of their pets.

"I would urge cat owners and even those who don't have cats or verge on 'hating' cats to take a breath and read all the information before adding this to the list of why cats are bad, which of course they are not," notes Kathy Covey, public relations manager for [Cat Adoption Team](#) in Sherwood.

She hopes that cat lovers will navigate the information, wash their hands and avoid "throwing out the cat with the cat litter."

As Cornwell puts it, toxoplasmosis "is absolutely a low-risk problem, but it does exist anywhere that there are cats. So with a few precautions you can spend your time worrying about something else."

Read the study "Toxoplasma gondii Infection and Self-directed Violence in Mothers," in the [Archives of General Psychiatry](#).