

# This Childhood Pet Increases Risk of Serious Mental Illness (M)

A parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii* is thought to be responsible for the increase in risk of mental illness.

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Having cats as childhood pets increases the risk of developing a mental disorder later in life, a study finds.

Exposure to cats in childhood increases the chance of suffering from serious mental health problems like schizophrenia.

The study's authors conclude:

"...cat ownership in childhood is significantly more common in families in which the child later becomes seriously mentally ill.

If true, an explanatory mechanism may be *Toxoplasma gondii*.

We urge our colleagues to try and replicate these findings to clarify whether childhood cat ownership is truly a risk factor for later schizophrenia."

The parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, which is thought to be the cause, is carried in the intestines of cats.

Humans can become exposed by accidentally ingesting their faeces.

This could happen after cleaning out a cat litter tray or gardening, for example.

*Toxoplasma gondii* causes a disease called toxoplasmosis.

More than 60 million people in the US carry the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite, but most are not troubled by it.

A healthy immune system usually fights off the infection.

However, people with weaker immune systems are more susceptible.

It causes flu-like symptoms in its weaker form.

This is not the first study to find the link between the parasite and mental illness.