

What is Toxoplasmosis and why is it linked to cats?

Toxoplasmosis is a parasitic infection which can affect any warm blooded animal. Cats are the only animal which shed the parasite in their faeces i.e. mess. This happens for a limited time soon after the animal becomes infected for the first time and these faeces only become infectious after 24 hours or more.

How do cats get it?

Cats catch toxoplasmosis from eating an infected animal e.g. a mouse or bird or from being fed raw meat. Kittens are sometimes born with the infection and can also shed infected faeces.

How do humans get it?

Humans, like cats, generally catch the infection from eating raw or undercooked meat, but could also catch it from eating infected soil e.g. on unwashed fruit or salad vegetables. A person must swallow the organism to catch the infection.

Why is it a problem if you are pregnant?

When a woman is infected with Toxoplasmosis for the first time during pregnancy or shortly before conception, there is 40% risk that the infection will be transferred to the unborn baby. The risk of transmission in early pregnancy is about 15% and in the last trimester about 65%, but a newly acquired infection at this point will have least impact on the baby. Studies have shown that 30% of 30 year olds will have unknowingly had a Toxoplasmosis infection and will therefore be immune to further infection with no risk to the baby.

Should I be tested for Toxoplasmosis if I own a cat?

There is no reason for you to be tested for Toxoplasmosis just because you own a cat. If your cat hunts, is a recent stray, has feline AIDS or has been ill it is possible that it is shedding infectious faeces. However, you have to swallow infected faeces (which have been out of the cat's body for 24+ hours) to become infected. If you have a problem with your immune system, toxoplasmosis can also be a concern. If for any reason you feel you need reassurance, a blood test for toxoplasmosis can help.

Is it safe to stroke my cat?

Cats are normally very clean animals and the fur of a healthy cat is unlikely to be contaminated by faeces. Normal stroking and handling of your cat should not pose any risk to you or your unborn baby. It is always better to wash your hands after handling an animal, especially before eating. There is no risk of catching Toxoplasmosis from cats' urine and saliva.

What if my cat scratches or bites me?

It is most unlikely you will catch Toxoplasmosis from a cat scratch or bite.

What about cleaning out the litter tray?

Good hygiene, removing faeces daily and using gloves and scoop should remove all risk from this necessary task. To clean the litter tray, scrub it thoroughly once a week with detergent using hot running water if possible and at an outside sink if you have one. Disinfectants may not kill the parasite and can be harmful to cats.

Would I know if my cat had Toxoplasmosis? Should it be tested?

Cats are sometimes ill with this infection, but it is not particularly useful to test your pet as the blood test will only show whether the cat has had toxoplasmosis at some time in its life. A test on the cat's faeces will show if it is shedding infected organisms at that time. However by the time you have the test result, the cat will almost certainly no longer be a source of infection, unless severely ill e.g. with feline AIDS. About 50% of cats are thought to have toxoplasmosis at some time in their lives and only 2% of cats will be shedding the parasite at any time. A healthy adult cat is unlikely to be a source of infection.

What if my cat is ill?

Cats which are in poor health, or living close to starvation level, are far more likely to be shedding the toxoplasmosis parasite in their mess. A cat with feline AIDS is particularly likely to be actively infected all the time. Looking after a cat that is very ill is best left to someone who is not in an at risk group.

What about looking after stray and ill cats?

Think carefully before taking in a stray cat if you are pregnant. If you are working in a cat rescue, sensible hygiene precautions should be taken to avoid any risk of the infection. Wear gloves to handle cats, let someone else clean up any mess. If you work in a cat rescue, a blood test before you become pregnant or as soon as you know you are, could be helpful.

What about the garden where my cat (and other cats) mess?

Garden soil where cats mess can be infected with the organism, which can survive up to 18 months in suitable conditions. If you are working in the garden, wear gloves and wash hands thoroughly and take particular care to avoid hand to mouth contact. Wash home grown produce thoroughly, especially if you are going to eat it uncooked.

Are there any other environments which might be a risk?

Feral (wild) and farm cats are more likely to be infected as they are persistent hunters and often in poor condition. If feral cats are using a stable or barn, the hay and straw may be infected and it would be best to avoid cleaning a work environment like this if you are pregnant.

***There is no reason
to get rid of your cat
because of Toxoplasmosis***



You can take the following precautions to avoid catching Toxoplasmosis

- Only eat meat which has been cooked thoroughly right through i.e. brown with no trace of blood or pinkness
- Wash you hands and all cooking utensils and surfaces after preparing raw meat.
- Wash fruit and vegetables thoroughly to remove all traces of soil.
- Take care with hygiene when handling dirty cat litter. Wear rubber gloves and wash your hands and the gloves afterwards. Clear out faeces daily. If possible get someone else to do the job.
- Always wear gloves when gardening. Wash your hands afterwards.
- Avoid unpasteurised goat's milk and unpasteurised goat's milk products.
- Cover children's outdoor sandboxes to prevent cats from using them as litter boxes.
- If your cat is in poor health e.g. has feline AIDS, consult your vet.

It is important for pregnant women to be aware that Toxoplasmosis can be caught from sheep at lambing time

REMEMBER

To catch Toxoplasmosis you must swallow the parasite.
This is more likely to happen if you eat undercooked meat than because you own a cat.

Tommy's
[let's talk baby]

The information in this leaflet was first produced by The Toxoplasmosis Trust, now part of Tommy's. If you are pregnant and would like further information about Toxoplasmosis please visit their website www.tommys.org


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Toxoplasmosis and your Pet Cat