

## TOXOPLASMOSIS

### What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*.

### How do you get infected with toxoplasmosis?

Infection occurs when tissue cysts in raw or undercooked meat from an infected animal are eaten. Infection can also occur by ingestion of food or water contaminated with *Toxoplasma* eggs from feces of infected animals. Another, less common method of infection is eating eggs that are from dirt in sandboxes or yards in which cats have defecated. If a pregnant woman becomes infected, the parasite can be transmitted to her developing fetus and cause severe illness.

### How is toxoplasmosis maintained in nature?

Members of the cat family are infected by eating cysts of *Toxoplasma* parasites present in the flesh of infected animals. Cats can also become infected by ingesting *Toxoplasma* eggs from contaminated food or water. The parasite completes its life cycle in the cat, which produces millions of *Toxoplasma* eggs in its stool. Once outside the cat, the eggs mature and become infectious for people and other animals.

### Who is at risk of acquiring toxoplasmosis?

People who are exposed to the parasite include gardeners, veterinarians, butchers, meat cutters, and cat owners. Persons eating raw or undercooked meat are also at risk.

### What are the symptoms of infection with toxoplasmosis?

Healthy adults generally have few or no signs of infection. Persons with weakened immune systems can develop symptoms about 5 to 20 days after infection. These include muscle aches, fever, breathing difficulty, and signs of inflammation of the brain. If a woman is infected shortly before or during pregnancy, the infection may be passed to the developing fetus. The baby may be born with mental retardation, blindness, or epilepsy.

### How is toxoplasmosis diagnosed and treated?

The most common method used to diagnose infection is a blood test for antibodies to *Toxoplasma*. Healthy people are usually not treated, unless the symptoms last for long periods of time. For pregnant women or persons who have weakened immune systems, drugs are available to treat toxoplasmosis.

### How can I prevent an infection?

Infection can be prevented by:

- Cooking meat to a safe temperature.
- Peeling or thoroughly washing fruits and vegetables before eating.

- Wearing gloves when you garden or do anything outdoors that involves handling soil; cats, who may pass the parasite in their feces, often use gardens and sandboxes as litter boxes.
- Washing your hands well with soap and warm water after outdoor activities, especially before you eat or prepare any food.
- Pregnant women or immunocompromised individuals avoiding changing cat litter or, if no one else is available to change the cat litter, clean the litter daily using gloves, then wash hands thoroughly.
- Not feeding raw or undercooked meat to cats and keeping cats inside to prevent acquisition of *Toxoplasma* by eating infected prey.

**Once infected with *Toxoplasma* is my cat always able to spread the infection to me?**

No. Cats can only spread *Toxoplasma* in their feces for a few weeks after they are first infected with the parasite. Like humans, cats rarely have symptoms when first infected, so most people don't know if their cat has been exposed to *Toxoplasma*. There are no reliable tests available to determine if your cat is passing *Toxoplasma* in its feces.

**Where can I get more information about toxoplasmosis?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has information available at their website

[http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/toxoplasmosis/factsht\\_toxoplasmosis.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/toxoplasmosis/factsht_toxoplasmosis.htm).