

What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by a protozoan parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*, which is found worldwide. Millions of people in the United States have been exposed to the parasite, but very few have had symptoms of disease because a normal immune system usually prevents the parasite from causing illness. However, pregnant women and individuals who have compromised immune systems should be cautious; for them, a *Toxoplasma* infection could cause serious health problems.

How is toxoplasmosis spread?

Persons may acquire toxoplasmosis from ingesting the parasite by hand-to-mouth contact with hands contaminated after gardening, cleaning a cat's litter box, or touching anything soiled with cat feces. Women who have their first exposure to *Toxoplasma* during their pregnancy may spread the infection to the unborn baby. Infection can also occur by eating contaminated raw or partly cooked meat, especially pork, lamb, or venison containing *Toxoplasma* cysts, or through ingestion of infective oocysts in food or water contaminated by cat feces. A few human cases of toxoplasmosis have also resulted from transplantation of infected organs or blood transfusions.

What are the symptoms of toxoplasmosis?

Symptoms usually begin within one to three weeks after exposure although the majority of persons will have no symptoms of disease following *Toxoplasma* infection. Some will experience an illness similar to mononucleosis with a fever, muscle aches, and swollen lymph nodes lasting a few days or weeks. Toxoplasmosis infections usually resolve in two to four weeks. Unborn babies and persons who are very immunocompromised (cancer chemotherapy patients, HIV/AIDS patients, organ transplant recipients, etc.) are at greatest risk of severe disease. Infants exposed before birth may be aborted, or be born with serious birth defects. Immunocompromised persons can experience reactivation of an infection that occurred earlier in their life and cause damage to the eyes, brain, or other organs.

What is the treatment for toxoplasmosis?

Once a diagnosis of toxoplasmosis is confirmed, you and your health care provider can discuss whether treatment is necessary. In an otherwise healthy person who is not pregnant, treatment usually is not needed. If symptoms occur, they typically go away within a few weeks to months. For pregnant women or persons who have weakened immune systems, medications are available to treat toxoplasmosis.

If I am pregnant or planning to get pregnant, should I get rid of my cat?

NO. Infected cats can only spread *Toxoplasma* in their stool for a few weeks after they are first infected with the parasite. Additionally, women who are exposed to *Toxoplasma* at least six months before becoming pregnant are not likely to pass the infection to their unborn child. Women who are planning to become pregnant may want to request a toxoplasmosis antibody test. If the test is positive, you have already been exposed to *Toxoplasma* and there is no need to worry about passing the infection to your baby.

Steps to prevent toxoplasmosis by persons at higher risk of disease

1. Wear gloves when gardening and working outdoors.
2. Do not eat rare or undercooked meat, especially pork or mutton. Wash hands thoroughly after handling raw meat, or touching any surfaces like cutting boards or dishes that contacted raw meat. Wash any cutting boards, sinks, knives, and other utensils that might have touched the raw meat thoroughly with soap and hot water to avoid cross-contaminating other foods.
3. If you are pregnant or immunocompromised, have someone else in the household assume the responsibility of changing the cat's litter box. If this is not possible, wear gloves and change the litter daily. If shed in cat feces, the *Toxoplasma* parasite must mature at least two to three days before it is infectious for humans.
4. Wash hands with soap and water before eating all meals and snacks.
5. Keep cats indoors and feed them commercial canned or dry food only. Cats usually become infected with *Toxoplasma* by hunting and eating infected animals, especially rodents and birds.
6. Avoid handling stray cats or kittens.

OSDH 10/05

