

Toxoplasmosis

General Information

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by a parasite that can live on people and animals for a long time.

People who are infected rarely have symptoms because their immune systems keep the parasite from causing illness.

If you are pregnant or have a weakened immune system, toxoplasmosis could cause serious problems.

How Toxoplasmosis Spreads

This infection can spread 3 ways:

- touching your mouth:
 - after being in the garden or sandbox
 - after cleaning the cat's litter box or touching anything that touched cat feces
 - after handling raw or undercooked meat or shellfish
 - eating raw or undercooked meat or shellfish
 - eating unwashed fruits and vegetables
- passing it to your baby if you became infected while pregnant
- having an organ transplant or blood transfusion (this is rare).

Symptoms

Symptoms include:

- fever
- headache
- swollen lymph glands
- muscle aches and pains for up to several weeks
- eye issues: blurred vision, pain in bright lights, redness.

You may be infected but not have symptoms.

Who is at Risk

- Pregnant women can pass the infection to their babies. Toxoplasmosis may cause eye or brain damage in babies exposed before birth and in people with immune system problems.
- You are also at risk if you:
 - have a weak immune system
 - have HIV or AIDS
 - have certain types of chemotherapy
 - had an organ transplant.

Ask your health care provider if there is treatment to prevent an infection.

How to Tell if You are Infected

If you are concerned about exposure, talk with your health care provider. He or she can do a blood test to see if you are infected.

How to Treat the Infection

If you are healthy and not pregnant, you don't need treatment. Symptoms will go away in a few days.

If you have a weak immune system or if you are pregnant, your doctor may prescribe medicine.

How to Prevent Infection

- Wear gloves when you handle soil (cats use gardens and sandboxes as their litter boxes).
- Wash your hands well after working in the garden or changing a litter box.
- Have someone else handle raw meat for you if you are pregnant. Or, wear latex gloves and clean any cutting boards, sinks, knives and counters well.
- Wash your hands after touching raw meat.
- Cook all meat thoroughly until it is no longer pink in the middle.

How to Care for Your Cat

Follow these steps to avoid infection if you have a weak immune system or are pregnant.

- Keep cats inside and feed them dry or canned cat food. Cats can become infected by eating raw or undercooked meat that is infected.
- Don't bring a new cat into your house that may have been an outside cat or that may have eaten raw meat, like birds and mice. Your vet can answer any questions about the cat and the risk for toxoplasmosis.
- If you are pregnant, have someone else change your cat's litter box. Or, if your cat is strictly an indoor cat, wear gloves and clean the box every day. Wash your hands with soap and warm water after changing the litter box.

Cats can spread toxoplasmosis in their feces a few weeks after they are infected.

Cats don't often show symptoms, but they are only infected for 3 weeks. Any testing done would always indicate positive results, not infection status.

Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention