

Toxoplasmosis & You

A single-celled parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii* causes a disease known as toxoplasmosis. While the parasite is found throughout the world, more than 60 million people in the United States may be infected with the *Toxoplasma* parasite. Of those who are infected, very few have symptoms because a healthy person's immune system usually keeps 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.



What role do cats play in the spread of Toxoplasmosis?

Cats become infected by eating infected rodents, birds, or other small animals. The parasite is then passed in the cat's feces and cats can shed millions of parasites for as long as 3 weeks after infection. The *Toxoplasma* parasite does not become infectious until 1 to 5 days after it is shed in a cat's feces. Mature cats are less likely to shed *Toxoplasma*. Cats and kittens prefer litter boxes, garden soils, and sandboxes for elimination; you may be exposed unintentionally by touching your mouth after changing a litter box, while gardening, or eating unwashed fruits and vegetables from a garden containing contaminated soil or water.

How do people get toxoplasmosis?

There are several ways to acquire a *Toxoplasma* infection. Eating undercooked, contaminated meat (especially pork, lamb, and venison) or eating food that was contaminated by utensils, cutting boards and other foods that had contact with contaminated meat. Drinking contaminated water. Accidentally swallowing the parasite through contact with cat feces that contain *Toxoplasma* (by cleaning a cat's litter box, touching or ingesting anything that has come into contact with infectious cat feces). Cleaning the litter box is the least likely way of becoming infected with *Toxoplasma* because infected cats shed the parasite for only a short period of time after becoming infected and it takes 1-5 days for the parasite to become infectious after it is shed. A congenital infection, where a woman is newly infected with *Toxoplasma* during pregnancy and passes the infection to her unborn child.

What are the signs and symptoms of toxoplasmosis?

Healthy people infected with *Toxoplasma* often do not have symptoms because their immune system usually keeps the parasite from causing illness. When illness occurs, it is usually mild flu-like symptoms that last for several weeks. If a woman is infected before getting pregnant, the unborn child will be protected because the mother has developed immunity. If a woman is pregnant and becomes newly infected during pregnancy, she can pass the infection to her unborn baby, potentially resulting in a miscarriage or a child born with no symptoms at birth that may develop eye or brain problems later in life. Persons with weakened immune systems may have severe symptoms, such as blurred vision or eye damage, seizures, nausea, and headaches.

How can I prevent toxoplasmosis?

There are several general sanitation and food safety steps you can take to reduce your chances of becoming infected with *Toxoplasma gondii*. Meats should be cooked to at least 160°F. Freezing meat at subzero temperatures for several days will greatly reduce the chance of infection. Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils and hands with hot soapy water after contact with raw meat or unwashed produce. Produce should be washed thoroughly before eating. Soil or sand might be contaminated with cat feces that contain *Toxoplasma*, therefore, wear gloves and wash hands with soap and warm water after gardening or contact with soil or sand. Avoid drinking untreated water.

Teach children the importance of washing hands to prevent infection. The children's sandbox should be covered when not in use. The litter box should be cleaned daily since the *Toxoplasma* parasite does not become infectious until 1 to 5 days after it is shed in a cat's feces. Do not feed the cat raw or undercooked meats and keep cats indoors.

If you are pregnant or immunosuppressed, then avoid cleaning the litter box if possible. If no one else can perform the task, wear disposable gloves and wash your hands with soap and warm water afterwards. Ensure that the litter box is changed daily. Keep cats indoors, and avoid handling or adopting stray cats. Do not get a new cat while pregnant.

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

No, cats only spread *Toxoplasma* in their feces for a few weeks following infection with the parasite. Like humans, cats rarely have symptoms when infected, so most people do not know if their cat has been infected. The *Toxoplasma* shedding in feces will go away on its own; therefore it does not help to have your cat or your cat's feces tested for *Toxoplasma*.

Do I have to give up my cat if I'm pregnant or planning on becoming pregnant?

No. You should follow the tips above to reduce your risk of environmental exposure to *Toxoplasma*.