



IF YOU ARE PREGNANT AND HAVE A CAT READ THIS!

**FIND OUT WHAT TOXOPLASMOSIS IS
AND HOW TO AVOID GETTING IT**

What is toxoplasmosis?

It is a parasitic infection that infests almost all species of mammals and birds in the world. Cats are the only animals that shed the parasite in their feces.

1 How do cats get toxoplasmosis?

From eating an infected animal like a mouse or bird or from infected raw meat. Most cats will have no symptoms, get over it and become immune to further infection. Even if they have symptoms, like blood-tinged diarrhea, fever, hepatitis or pneumonia, they usually get over it on their own and develop immunity.

2 How do people get toxoplasmosis?

People become infected from eating the oocysts of the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite usually in raw or under-cooked meat, or in infected soil on unwashed fruits or vegetables or from infected cat feces. The important thing to remember is that the oocysts must be swallowed by the person. Many people have been exposed to the oocysts and developed natural resistance to it without realizing it. People who do get clinically ill are those with weakened immune systems.

3 Should a pregnant woman have her cat tested for toxoplasmosis?

If the cat hunts, is a recent stray, has feline immuno-deficiency virus (FIV) or has been ill, yes. Take a sample of the cat's feces to your vet for testing; it will show if it is shedding infected organisms at that time (the problem is by the time you get the results, the cat may no longer be a source of infection). A blood test isn't good enough as it will only tell you if the cat has had the infection at some time in its life. A cat sheds infected feces only after it has been infected for the first time, that is, for 2 to 20 days of its lifespan. Even if the cat's feces is infectious, a pregnant woman has to swallow some (it becomes infected only after it has been out of the cat's body for 24+ hours) in order to become infected herself. The bottom line is: a healthy cat is very unlikely to be a source of infection. Cats in poor health, however, especially those with FIV, are more suspect.

4 Why is it a problem if a pregnant woman gets toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis can result in transplacental infection of the foetus IF a woman gets infected for the first time while she is pregnant. If the woman has developed an immunity before the pregnancy, then the baby is not at risk.

5 Should a pregnant woman be tested for toxoplasmosis?

Pregnant women are routinely tested in Greece for toxoplasmosis through blood and urine tests using immunoserologic techniques. Check with your doctor. Most adult humans are, however, immune.

6 Is it safe for a pregnant woman to have a pet cat?

Yes, of course it is. Simply follow sensible rules of hygiene. For instance, normal petting of your cat isn't a problem for you or your baby, but it is always a good idea to wash your hands after handling a pet and before eating. You will not catch toxoplasmosis from cats' urine, saliva or hair. Cats are generally very clean animals and a healthy cat is very unlikely to have any feces on their fur. In the unlikely event this happens, washing your hands is a sensible precaution.

7 Should a pregnant woman clean out the kitty litter?

If you can avoid it, avoid it! If not, take sensible precautions to remove any risk. Wear rubber gloves, clean feces out daily using a scoop (remember, feces becomes infectious after 24+ hours). Scrub tray thoroughly once a week with detergent and hot water, outdoors. (Don't use disinfectants; they don't kill parasites and are harmful to cats). If your cat messes outside the litter box, simply clean it up promptly.

8 Can you get toxoplasmosis from a garden?

Garden soil can be infected with the organism if cats deposit infected feces in it; in the right soil conditions, the organism can survive for up to 18 months. So, if you work in the garden (or barn or similar environment), wear gloves, wash hands thoroughly and avoid hand-to-mouth contact. Also, wash garden produce thoroughly before eating, whether it's from your garden or the supermarket.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- * To catch toxoplasmosis you must swallow the parasite; people are more likely to ingest this from undercooked meat than from a cat's feces. Frequency of infection in cats is 0.9%; cows 39.7%; goats 26.4%; sheep 26.2%.
- * Eat meat that has been thoroughly cooked, that is, without any trace of blood.
- * Wash your hands thoroughly after handling raw meat (utensils and counters too).
- * Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly with liquid soap and water before eating.
- * Always wear gloves when working in the garden; wash hands when you are finished.
- * Do not drink unpasteurised milk. Boil fresh milk; the parasite is destroyed in temperatures higher than 66 degrees C.
- * When cleaning out the cat's litter box; clear feces daily, wear rubber gloves, use a scoop, wash your hands and gloves afterwards.
- Humans and animals cannot be directly infected by cats.

This brochure was written by Elizabeth Koubena for SPAZ; portions may be freely quoted as long as SPAZ is mentioned as the source.