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Toxoplasmosis and Pregnancy

What is Toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is the disease syndrome caused by a protozoan organism called *Toxoplasma gondii*. It affects most animals, but most notably sheep, cats, and humans. Because of the risk to an unborn child, many medical doctors go so far as to recommend that pregnant women do not keep cats as pets; however, it is our medical opinion (and many other veterinarians agree!) that a pregnant woman can safely keep a cat as a pet while taking certain precautions.

What is the risk to an unborn child?

A human with an acute (active) toxoplasmosis infection experiences varying degrees of illness: fever, swollen lymph nodes, muscle stiffness, joint pain, fever, and lethargy. These symptoms may be so mild as to go unnoticed. Illness lasts from 1-12 weeks and is often dismissed as a bad cold or mononucleosis.

However, if the person infected is a pregnant woman, the *Toxoplasma* organism may cross the placenta. The amount of damage done depends on the stage of pregnancy at the time of infection. Infection in early pregnancy may result in miscarriage or stillbirth, or may result in a child with varying degrees of blindness or neurological conditions. Sometimes, problems are not evident at birth and show up later in life. Fortunately, only 30-40% of infections in pregnant women result in damage to the fetus.

The problems described above occur only when the woman is infected with Toxoplasmosis for the first time; that is, a person who has already had the infection is not likely to get sick again nor is she likely to transmit the organism to an unborn child. It is estimated that 1/3 of the U.S. population has already been exposed to the *Toxoplasma* organism. In general, people who do experience more than one acute episode of illness associated with Toxoplasmosis are severely immunosuppressed (as from AIDS or cancer therapy).

How do people get this disease?

There are two basic forms of the *Toxoplasma* organism. The oocyst (which is shed in cat feces), and the tissue stages (which live in the flesh of such food animals as pigs and lambs). A person who inadvertently eats either of these forms of *Toxoplasma* is liable to become infected. Usually, this is from eating undercooked meat, or by ingesting the oocysts from fecal contamination on the hands.

If my cat has Toxoplasmosis, won't he be obviously sick?

Not necessarily. The form of infection which is contagious to humans is the intestinal form, in which the cat sheds oocysts in its feces. The cat may or may not show diarrhea. Cats may experience an acute illness similar to that which humans experience; however, in adult cats, symptoms are usually mild and go unnoticed. This form of infection is not contagious to humans, though a pregnant cat could transmit the disease to her kittens.

How is my cat a risk to me?

The cat has probably been over-emphasized as a carrier of Toxo; most human infections result from eating tissue stages of Toxo in undercooked meat.

Usually a cat will only shed oocysts after its first infection of Toxo; a cat that has already had a Toxo infection usually will not re-shed the oocysts unless its immune system has been compromised (as through the feline leukemia virus infection, FIV infection or drugs). Cats shedding oocysts generally do so for 5-14 days.

Oocysts require 24-48 hours to sporulate – that is, grow into a form which is dangerous to people. For this reason, the cat's litter box should be changed or scooped daily. Dangerous oocysts may survive in soil up to 18 months so it is important to wear rubber gloves when gardening. Note that freezing weather will not reliably kill dangerous oocysts in the soil nor will freezing the meat kill the dangerous tissue forms.

Your cat may be tested to see if he/she has already had Toxoplasmosis; a cat that has already been infected is unlikely to shed dangerous oocysts in the future.

How can I avoid infection?

1. Probably the most important thing is to be careful when cooking raw meat, especially lamb and pork. **DO NOT EAT UNDERCOOKED MEAT OR TASTE MEAT BEFORE IT IS FINISHED COOKING.**
2. Wash your hands after handling your cat and his/her litterbox.
3. Do not allow your cat to eat raw meat. Feed only commercial cat food and do not allow your cat outside to hunt.
4. Change or scoop the litterbox daily. It is best of course, if someone else changes the litterbox while you are pregnant.
5. Do not dump the litterbox into the backyard. Always wear rubber gloves while gardening.
6. Do not allow the cats access to barns where food animals are kept. This is how food animals (and hence the meat you eat) get infected.
7. Do not drink raw milk, especially goat's milk.

Although it is possible to get Toxoplasmosis from cats, no correlation has been found between cat ownership and Toxo infection. There is, however, a strong relationship between Toxoplasma infection and working with raw meat as in a slaughterhouse or as a butcher. Be very careful when handling raw meat.