



## Toxoplasmosis

### What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is caused by a parasite known as *Toxoplasmosa gondii*. Cats can become infected with *T. gondii* by eating an infected animal, usually rats and mice. Most cats will quickly develop an immune response to this which kills the organism, but in the meantime may shed oocysts (eggs) through the faeces for up to three weeks after exposure.

Most cats will develop immunity and it would be very rare to shed oocysts after that. Most cats will deal with the infection without a problem. In rare cases, disease will occur after the initial infection or infection is reactivated because the cat's immune system is severely compromised.

### What are the signs of toxoplasmosis in a cat?

Clinical signs do not always appear in infected cats. Some clinical signs to look out for are:

- Lethargy
- Loss of appetite/weight loss
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Eye infections
- Liver inflammation.

If you notice any of these symptoms, please see your vet immediately. The disease can sometimes show up in a blood test, but this is not always the case. If your vet finds your cat had toxoplasmosis, the disease can be treated with antibiotics.

To prevent your cat coming into contact with things that can cause toxoplasmosis, keep your cat indoors so they can't eat potentially infected rodents and won't come into contact with cat faeces that might contain oocysts. Feed your cat tinned or dry cat food, and don't feed them raw meat. You could also install cat-proof fencing so that stray cats can't come on to your property.

### What are the issues for people?

Immunity to toxoplasmosis due to previous infection is extremely common. Most people infected with toxoplasmosis won't become ill, however it is an issue for people with low immune systems, pregnant women, and frail, elderly, or ill people. If a pregnant woman who has never previously been infected becomes infected, there is a risk of transmission and harm to her unborn baby.

Transmission (except in the case of mother to foetus) is mainly by mouth, so regular hand-washing and avoiding putting your hands to your face and mouth helps to reduce the risk of toxoplasmosis (and many other illnesses).

While it is particularly important that pregnant women minimise their risk of exposure to toxoplasmosis, it should be noted that people are much more likely to contract toxoplasmosis from uncooked or undercooked meat than from exposure to cats.

**If you are pregnant, ask someone else to clean the litter tray** – oocysts need 24 hours to hatch, so daily cleaning will minimise the chance of infection. If you do need to clean the tray yourself, use gloves and a scoop to avoid contact with the faeces, and wash your hands thoroughly with warm soapy water afterwards.

The litter tray should be cleaned as often as possible, using boiling water to wash the tray. Daily cleaning will greatly reduce the chance of infection. Always wash your hands thoroughly afterwards.

Avoid eating raw or undercooked meat and try to wear gloves when handling raw meat, as toxoplasmosis can be carried by a number of animals, including but not limited to sheep and kangaroos. Don't drink unpasteurised milk.

Wash fruit and vegetables thoroughly (even if you peel them, they should be washed first). Maintain excellent kitchen hygiene and avoid cross-contamination (such as using a knife that cut raw meat, to then cut vegetables).

If you have a sandpit, cover it when not in use to prevent cats using it as a litter tray. Wear gloves when gardening as oocysts can live in the dirt from infected faeces.

According to *Scientific American* on 17 May 2011, "about a tenth of the US population is infected by *T. gondii* (in some countries, such as France, the infection rate is seven to eight times higher, possibly because of the widespread consumption of uncooked and undercooked meat). Human toxoplasmosis is usually considered to be symptom-free (what doctors refer to as asymptomatic). Exceptions are patients with a weakened immune system and the unborn (hence the need for pregnant women to avoid cleaning cat-litter boxes)".

Sadly, many beloved pets are given up due to bad information about toxoplasmosis. With simple safety precautions, the risk of infection from your cat is very low. It is much more common for adults to become infected by eating raw or undercooked meat, or fruit and vegetables that have not been properly washed – and you can reduce this risk with good food and personal hygiene, avoiding uncooked or undercooked meat and unpasteurised milk, and taking steps for your cats to avoid contact with the parasite. **If you have any concerns, see your GP.**

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