

Pregnancy and Toxoplasmosis

If you're expecting a baby, you may have heard of toxoplasmosis because it can cause serious birth defects. A woman who acquires toxoplasmosis during pregnancy can transmit the infection to her unborn child. And a congenital toxoplasmosis infection in utero can lead to miscarriage or an array of malformations at birth. Because one of the ways to become infected is through contact with the infected feces of cats, many pregnant women try to lower their risk of acquiring toxoplasmosis by giving their cat away or putting the cat outside.



Thankfully, you can easily avoid contracting toxoplasmosis from cat feces *without* giving up your beloved feline "baby." Cats acquire toxoplasmosis from eating contaminated raw meat, birds, mice, or soil. While cats are the only species of animal to shed the infectious stage in their feces, other animals can disseminate toxoplasmosis if their infected meat is eaten without proper cooking.

Fortunately, cat ownership does not necessarily increase the risk of acquiring toxoplasmosis. An understanding of the life cycle of *Toxoplasma gondii* (*T. gondii*) and the role that cats play in disease transmission can allay fears of contracting congenital toxoplasmosis from your feline companion. Cats should continue to be sources of joy and companionship to their owners during pregnancy and following the birth of a child.

Disease Transmission

T. gondii is a protozoan organism that can infect all mammals, who serve as intermediate hosts. Once a cat has been infected with toxoplasmosis, he typically acquires immunity and can only rarely be reinfected. So, normally, it is only during a cat's first exposure to *T. gondii* that he will excrete potentially infectious oocysts (reproducing microorganisms). In addition, oocysts are not immediately infective, requiring an incubation period of one to five days.

Humans can acquire toxoplasmosis in one of three ways. Most commonly, people contract the disease from the consumption of undercooked meat, which contains *T. gondii* within tissue cysts. A less common method of acquisition is through direct ingestion of infective oocysts. Finally, transplacental transmission of the disease to an unborn child may occur when the mother acquires a primary infection while pregnant.

Likelihood of Contracting Toxoplasmosis

Because it's difficult for cats to transmit toxoplasmosis directly to their caregivers, a pregnant woman is generally unlikely to contract the disease from her pet cat. Several factors keep the chance of such transmission low.

First of all, only cats who ingest tissue cysts acquire infection. Within the feline population, this would be limited to outdoor cats who hunt and eat rodents, as well as cats who are fed raw meat by their owners. In addition, only after a cat is first exposed to *T. gondii* does he typically excrete oocysts, and he does so for only two weeks. An outdoor hunting cat is often exposed to the disease as a kitten and is, therefore, less likely to transmit the infection as he ages.

Secondly, because oocysts become infective only after one to five days, exposure to the disease is unlikely as long as the cat's litter box is changed daily.

Finally, since oocysts are transmitted by ingestion, in order to contract toxoplasmosis, a woman would have to make contact with contaminated feces in the litter box and then, without washing her hands, touch her mouth or otherwise transmit the contaminated fecal matter to her digestive system.

Reducing Your Risk of Toxoplasmosis

Even though it is unlikely that a woman will contract toxoplasmosis from her cat, it's a good idea to err on the side of caution. The following recommendations will help cat owners expecting a child to reduce their risk of contracting toxoplasmosis.

Avoid undercooked meat.

Wash all uncooked vegetables thoroughly.

Be certain to wash all cutting boards and utensils that may have come in contact with meat before using them to prepare other foods.

Wear gloves when working in soil. If gloves are not worn, hands need to be washed thoroughly following soil contact.

Ask a spouse, friend, or neighbor to help out with litter box duties while you're pregnant.

If you don't have help to keep the litter box clean, wear rubber gloves when changing the litter and thoroughly wash your hands afterwards.

Change your cat's litter on a daily basis.

Getting rid of your feline companion is NOT a necessary precaution. Cat ownership has many benefits that are immeasurable in terms of companionship and love. While it is possible for cats to transmit toxoplasmosis, the risk of your feline friend passing the disease to you is low, especially if you follow the recommendations above. So, your cat can safely remain as a loved member of the family as you await your new arrival.

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Town of Truckee Animal Control
530.582.7830
www.townoftruckee.com

Humane Society of Truckee-Tahoe
530.587.5948
www.hstt.org