



TOXOPLASMOSIS

WHAT IS TOXOPLASMOSIS?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by a single-celled parasite named *Toxoplasma gondii*. It is found throughout the world. More than 60 million people in the United States probably are infected with the *Toxoplasma* parasite, but very few have symptoms because the immune system usually keeps the parasite from causing illness.

HOW CAN I GET TOXOPLASMOSIS?

- You can become infected after accidentally ingesting (swallowing) infective *Toxoplasma* eggs from soil or other contaminated surfaces. This can happen by putting your hands to your mouth after gardening, cleaning a cat's litter box, or by touching anything that has come into contact with cat feces.
- If you are pregnant when first infected with *Toxoplasma*, you can pass infection to your baby.
- If you have eaten raw or partly cooked meat, especially pork, lamb, or venison, or if you have touched your hands to your mouth after touching the meat.
- Through organ transplantation or transfusion, although these instances are rare.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF TOXOPLASMOSIS?

You may feel like you have the "flu," swollen lymph glands, or muscle aches and pains that last for a few days to several weeks. However, most people who become infected with toxoplasmosis don't know it. On the other hand, people with immune system problems, such as those with HIV/AIDS, those taking certain types of chemotherapy, or persons who have recently received an organ transplant, and infants, may develop severe toxoplasmosis, which results in damage to the eye or the brain. Infants who became infected before birth can be born retarded or with several other serious mental or physical problems.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE TOXOPLASMOSIS?

See your health care provider who will order a blood sample to be taken.

WHO IS AT RISK FOR SEVERE TOXOPLASMOSIS?

- Babies born to mothers who are FIRST exposed to *Toxoplasma* infection several months before or DURING pregnancy are at risk for severe disease. However, many exposed infants have no symptoms at all. Mothers who are first exposed

to Toxoplasma more than 6 months before becoming pregnant are not likely to pass the infection to their children.

- Persons with severely weakened immune systems are at greater risk for severe toxoplasmosis. In such cases, an infection that occurred anytime during life can reactivate and cause the severe symptoms of toxoplasmosis such as damage to the eye or brain.

HOW CAN I PREVENT TOXOPLASMOSIS?

Because Toxoplasma infections usually cause no symptoms or only mild symptoms, and your immune system keeps any remaining parasites in your body from causing further symptoms, most people don't need to worry about getting it. However, if you have a weakened immune system or are pregnant, there are several steps you should take to prevent toxoplasmosis.

- If you have a weakened immune system, get the blood test for Toxoplasma. If your test is positive, your doctor can tell you if and when you need to take medicine to prevent the infection from reactivating. If your test is negative, you can take precautions to avoid infection.
- If you are planning on becoming pregnant, you may consider being tested for Toxoplasma. If the test is positive there is no need to worry about passing the infection to your baby. If the test is negative, take necessary precautions to avoid infection.
- If you are already pregnant, you and your health care provider should discuss your risk of toxoplasmosis. Your health care provider may order a blood sample for testing.
- Wear gloves when you garden or do anything outdoors that involves handling soil. Cats, who may pass the parasite in their feces, often use gardens and sandboxes as litter boxes. Wash your hands well with soap and warm water after outdoor activities, especially before you eat or prepare any food.
- Have someone who is healthy and not pregnant handle raw meat for you. If this is not possible, wear clean latex gloves when you touch raw meat and wash any cutting boards, sinks, knives, and other utensils that might have touched the raw meat. Wash your hands well with soap and warm water afterwards.
- Cook all meat thoroughly, that is, until it is no longer pink in the center or until the juices run clear. Don't sample meat before it is fully cooked.

AM I ABLE TO KEEP MY CAT?

Yes, but if you have a weakened immune system or are pregnant there are some steps to take to avoid being exposed to Toxoplasma.

- Help prevent your cat from getting infected with Toxoplasma. Keep cats indoors and feed them dry or canned cat food. Cats can become infected by eating or being fed raw or undercooked meat.
- Don't bring a new cat into your house that might have been an outdoor cat or might have been fed raw meat. Avoid handling stray cats and kittens. Your vet can answer any other questions you may have regarding your cat and risk for toxoplasmosis.
- Have someone who is healthy and not pregnant change your cat's litter box. If this is not possible, wear gloves and clean the litter box daily (the parasite

found in cat feces can only infect you a few days after being passed). Wash your hands well with soap and warm water afterwards.

ONCE INFECTED WITH TOXOPLASMA IS MY CAT ALWAYS ABLE TO SPREAD THE INFECTION TO ME?

No. Cats can only spread Toxoplasma in their feces for a few weeks after they are first infected with the parasite. Like humans, cats rarely have symptoms when first infected, so most people don't know if their cat has been exposed to Toxoplasma. There are no good tests available to determine if your cat is passing Toxoplasma in its feces.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR TOXOPLASMOSIS?

Once a diagnosis of toxoplasmosis is confirmed, you and your health care provider can discuss whether treatment is necessary. In an otherwise healthy person who is not pregnant, treatment is not needed. Symptoms will usually go away within a few weeks. For pregnant women or persons who have weakened immune systems, drugs are available to treat toxoplasmosis.

This information prepared in association with the American Association of Veterinary Parasitologists (AAVP).

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