

Pregnancy and Toxoplasmosis

It's safe to keep your cats

Source: The Humane Society of the United States

The myth about cats giving pregnant women toxoplasmosis has been causing misery for a long time. Pregnant women can transmit toxoplasmosis, a rare parasitic disease, to their unborn babies, and a toxoplasmosis infection can lead to miscarriage or cause malformed babies.

Since toxoplasmosis can be transmitted via contact with cat feces, many pregnant women are told to lower their risk by giving away their cats or by putting their cats outside. Neither is necessary.

THE CDC SAYS YOUR CAT ISN'T THE GREATEST THREAT:

It's unlikely that your cat will give you toxoplasmosis. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "people are more likely to get [toxoplasmosis] from eating raw meat or from gardening." To help keep you and your baby safe, The HSUS has put together tips for avoiding exposure to toxoplasmosis.

OTHER ANIMALS CAN TRANSMIT TOXOPLASMOSIS:

Cats get toxoplasmosis from eating contaminated raw meat, birds, mice, or soil. But cats aren't the only animals who can transmit it, they're just the only species to shed the infectious stage in their feces. Humans can contract toxoplasmosis from the infected, undercooked meat of other animals, too.

UNDERSTANDING THE DISEASE CAN MAKE YOU FEEL SAFER:

An understanding of the life cycle of *Toxoplasma gondii* (*T. gondii*) and the role that cats play in disease transmission can allay fears of cats' role in the disease.

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 get 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.



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HOW HUMANS GET TOXOPLASMOSIS:

Humans most commonly 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 can occur when the mother gets a primary infection while pregnant.

THE 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.

- Only cats who ingest tissue cysts get infected. 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.
- Typically a cat only excretes oocysts when she is first exposed to *T. gondii*, and this goes on 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 she ages.
- Because oocysts only become infective after one to five days, exposure to the disease is unlikely as long as you clean the cat's litter box daily.
- 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.

TAKE STEPS TO PROTECT YOURSELF AGAINST TOXOPLASMOSIS:

Even though it is unlikely that you will contract toxoplasmosis from your cat, it's good to be as careful as possible. 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.
- Wash all cutting boards and utensils that might have come in contact with meat before using them.
- Wear gloves when gardening or working in soil for other reasons. If you don't wear gloves, wash your hands thoroughly afterward.



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- Ask your spouse, friends, or neighbors 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 afterward.
- Have your cat's litter changed on a daily basis.
- Keep your cat indoors.