

Toxoplasmosis Fact Sheet

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*

The parasite is common in warm-blooded animals including cats, rats, mice, pigs, cows, sheep, chickens, and birds.

People usually get toxoplasmosis from contact with cat feces (stool) or from eating undercooked meat

The parasites are shed in the feces of infected cats and become infectious after 1 to 5 days. People become infected when they get the parasite in their mouths. This can happen when cleaning cat litter, or through contaminated food, water, or dust. Children can get toxoplasmosis by playing in sandboxes that contain cat feces. People can also get toxoplasmosis from eating infected meat that is undercooked (usually lamb or pork). People don't spread the infection to other people except when a mother gets toxoplasmosis during pregnancy and passes it to her unborn baby.

Toxoplasmosis is a very severe infection for unborn babies and for people with weakened immune systems

Unborn babies get this parasite from their mothers. This can happen if the mother is infected during pregnancy, especially during the first three months. Unborn babies are at risk of severe infection that may result in mental retardation, blindness in one or both eyes, or death.

In healthy children and adults, toxoplasmosis may cause no symptoms at all, or a mild illness (swollen lymph glands, fever, headache, and muscle aches) 5 to 23 days after exposure. People who have had toxoplasmosis in the past and then develop problems with their immune systems (such as AIDS) can have severe infections of the brain that can lead to death.

Infections can be treated with antibiotics

Talk to your doctor if you think you have been exposed to the toxoplasma parasite.

Infections can be prevented

- Throw cat litter out every day. Feed cats commercial cat food. Don't let cats eat wild rodents or birds or raw or undercooked kitchen scraps.
- Cook lamb, beef, and pork until well done.
- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly before eating.
- Eliminate cross-contamination from raw foods to cooked ones by thorough washing of hands, cutting boards, knives, and other utensils.
- Wash hands thoroughly after working with soil, after cleaning litter boxes, before and after handling foods, and before eating.
- Wear gloves when handling potentially contaminated material, such as soil and cat litter.
- Cover sandboxes when not in use.
- Persons with weakened immune systems and pregnant women should be particularly careful to avoid contact with cat feces and soil, and to avoid ingestion of undercooked meats.

A pregnant woman should tell her doctor if she has contact with cats

A blood test is available to tell whether a person has had toxoplasmosis. A pregnant woman who has exposure to cats and who develops symptoms should see her doctor.