

Pregnancy and Toxoplasmosis

What is Toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*.

How are Toxoplasma parasites spread?

These parasites may live in wild rodents or birds. If cats eat infected animals, birds or other raw meat, they may get *Toxoplasma* parasites.

The parasite lives in the cat's intestine and makes tiny cysts (closed sacs). Cysts are in the cat's feces (poop) for 3–30 days after infection. Cysts can cause infection when they "ripen" 1–5 days after the cat defecates (poops).

Cats can pass this parasite on to humans.

Toxoplasma cannot be passed from one person to another, except in the case of pregnant mothers. They can pass it to their unborn baby.

What does Toxoplasmosis do to people?

Most people do not know that they have Toxoplasmosis. You may get swollen glands, and/or muscle aches and pains that last more than a month. This disease usually goes away without treatment.



The parasite may be stored in cysts that hide in the brain, eye, heart and skeletal muscles for many years. If your immune system is weakened, the cysts may cause damage and disease. Although rare, it can cause eye, liver, heart and brain damage.

Can I pass Toxoplasmosis to my baby?

If you are infected with *Toxoplasma* when you are pregnant, you can pass the infection to your developing baby.

Your baby is **at most risk** if you were infected just before you got pregnant or during the first trimester (first three months of pregnancy).

How can Toxoplasmosis affect my baby?

Toxoplasmosis may cause:

- Miscarriage
- Stillbirth
- Premature birth
- Vision loss, caused by damage to the retina, that can happen at birth or later in life
- Brain damage, causing mental disability or seizures, that can happen at birth or later in life
- Heart defects

How do I know if I have Toxoplasmosis?

If you have already been around cats you have likely had a mild infection that went away on its own.

A blood test can check if you have antibodies. Antibodies show if a pregnant woman has had a recent or past infection with *Toxoplasma*.

How is Toxoplasmosis treated?

Mild Toxoplasmosis disease is not usually treated.

Severe infections are treated with medication prescribed by a medical professional.

How can I get Toxoplasma?

You may be infected by Toxoplasma by:

- Touching your mouth after handling or breathing in:
 - cat litter used by cats infected with Toxoplasma
 - dirt where cats infected with Toxoplasma buried their feces (poop)
- Eating undercooked meat or poultry that has been infected with Toxoplasma cysts
- Eating foods (including fruits and vegetables) which have touched raw, Toxoplasma-infected meat or poultry, or the cutting board, knives or utensils used on raw meat or poultry
- Eating fruits or vegetables that touched Toxoplasma infected dirt or water
- Drinking water infected with Toxoplasma

Does my job put me at risk for Toxoplasma?

You may come in contact with Toxoplasma parasites if at your job you work with:

Animals, or touch cat feces (e.g. veterinarians and assistants, zoo attendants, animal keepers, breeders)

Raw meat (e.g. cooks, butchers, line processors, slaughterhouse workers, meat inspectors)

Soil or water (e.g. agricultural workers, landscapers, gardeners)

Used needles or contaminated lab equipment (e.g. laboratory workers, health care workers)

How can I protect myself and my baby from Toxoplasmosis?

It is better to prevent Toxoplasmosis than to treat it.

Cat care and hygiene

- Avoid stray cats
- Do not get a new cat while you are pregnant
- Keep your cat indoors, it is less likely to become infected
- Feed your cat only canned or dry commercial cat food
- Have someone else clean the cat litter box
- If you have to clean the cat litter box, wear disposable gloves and wash hands well when you are finished
- Change the litter box every day. It takes 1–5 days for the parasite to become infectious in the cat's feces (poop)

Cat Litter Tips

Do not shake cat litter out. Flush it down the toilet or bag it carefully. Clean litter pan daily with boiling water.

Outdoors and Gardening

- Cover children's outdoor sandboxes
- Wear gloves and wash your hands after:
 - gardening
 - playing with children in uncovered sand boxes

Food Safety

- Wash your hands before and after preparing food, eating and touching mouth or eyes
- Wash, peel and/or cook fruits and vegetables before eating
- Wash counters, cutting boards, knives and utensils after preparing food—especially after raw meat/poultry and before fruits or vegetables are prepared
- Freeze meat/poultry to -18°C/0°F for a few days to kill any possible Toxoplasma parasite
- After cooking, check internal temperature with a meat/poultry thermometer before eating:
 - whole cuts of meat—should be at least 145°F/63°C; wait 3 minutes before cutting or eating the meat
 - ground meat—should be at least 160°F/71°C
 - all poultry—should be at least 165°F/74°C; wait 3 minutes before cutting or eating the poultry
- Drink only pasteurized milk products

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Region of Waterloo Public Health

Reproductive Health Program