

Toxoplasmosis

FACT SHEET

What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is a common infection found in birds and mammals across North America. The infection is caused by a parasite and affects 10 to 20 out of every 100 people in North America by the time they are adults.

What are the symptoms of toxoplasmosis?

Most people who are infected do not show any signs of the disease. Those who do get sick usually have flu-like symptoms such as fever, sore throat, sore muscles and tiredness. Glands in the neck, armpits or groin can become swollen, but are usually not sore. In some cases the infection can also cause temporary blurred vision or loss of vision.

Who is at high risk from toxoplasmosis?

Pregnant women and persons with a suppressed immune system due to AIDS, cancer or following organ transplants should reduce their risk of toxoplasmosis by following the advice in this fact sheet.

Pregnancy and toxoplasmosis

If you are pregnant or are thinking of becoming pregnant soon, avoiding infection is very important as it can cause harm to your unborn baby.

A growing fetus can become infected with the toxoplasmosis parasite if the mother is infected with the parasite while pregnant or before she becomes pregnant. Infection in the unborn child early in pregnancy can result in miscarriage, poor growth, early delivery or stillbirth. If a child is born with toxoplasmosis he/she can experience eye problems, hydrocephalus (water on the brain), convulsions or mental disabilities.

How is toxoplasmosis spread?

All animals (including humans) and birds can be infected with the toxoplasmosis parasite. However, cats are the primary source of the parasite. Food animals are thought to be infected by eating food stuffs and water contaminated by cat feces. The parasite enters the muscles of a bird or animal when it eats raw meat or drinks the milk of another animal that is infected. Cats can spread the parasite in their feces.

Common ways for people to become infected with toxoplasmosis include:

- Eating raw or undercooked meats
- Drinking unpasteurized milk
- Cleaning cat litter boxes
- Working in gardens or playing in sandboxes that contain cat feces
- Eating unwashed fruits and vegetables

Is there a treatment for toxoplasmosis?

Most people will recover from toxoplasmosis without treatment. However, medication is available from your family doctor to treat the infection. Treatment may be needed if the eyes or heart are affected or if the infection occurs in persons with weak immune systems or long lasting diseases (e.g. AIDS or cancer).

Treatment of an infected pregnant woman may prevent or lessen the disease in her unborn child. Treatment of an infected infant will also lessen the severity of the disease as the child grows.

How can I avoid getting toxoplasmosis?

- Fruits and vegetables should be peeled or washed thoroughly
- Order or cook your meat well done (food thermometer: beef, lamb, veal = 71⁰C; pork, ground meat and wild game = 71⁰C whole poultry = 82⁰ C)
- Wash your hands, utensils, and cutting boards with hot soapy water after handling raw meat to prevent contamination of other foods
- Do not drink unpasteurized milk from any animal (cow, goat, etc)
- Wear gloves when gardening, or any contact with soil or sand, then wash your hands
- Follow the advice below regarding cats

Cats and You

Just like other family members, your pet cat can pass disease on to you. Most cats infected with toxoplasmosis do not appear sick. The cat's feces contain the parasites for only 4 weeks after the cat is infected. However, the feces may remain infectious for well over a year.

Cats which have been raised indoors, have never caught and eaten mice or birds, and who have never been fed raw meat are not likely to be infected. A stray or unfamiliar cat that appears sick should not be handled but should be reported to the animal shelter.

Here are some tips to help you enjoy your pet cat:

- Wash your hands after patting, brushing or being licked by your cat
- Wear gloves when cleaning the litter box, then thoroughly wash your hands with hot, soapy water
- Clean the litter box daily so that the parasite does not have a chance to become infectious
- Be careful not to breathe in dust when cleaning the cat litter box
- Dispose of cat feces in a plastic bag in the garbage - do not compost the cat litter, or dispose of the litter near your garden
- Avoid cleaning cat litter boxes if you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant
- If pregnant, keep cats inside and do not adopt or handle stray cats
- Place a secure lid on your sandbox to prevent cats from using it as a litter box
- Don't feed raw meat to your cat
- See a vet if there are any signs of illness in your cat

Foodhandling and You

There are four main things you can do to reduce your risk of food borne illness: **clean, separate, cook and chill.**

CLEAN. Wash hands, utensils and surfaces with hot soapy water before, during and after preparing foods. Sanitize countertops, cutting boards and utensils with a mild bleach and water solution. Wash all produce thoroughly before eating or cooking.

SEPARATE. Keep raw meats and poultry away from other foods during storage and preparation. Keep separate cutting boards for raw meats and vegetables. Always keep foods covered.

COOK. Cook food thoroughly -- cooking times and temperatures vary for different meat and poultry. Prepare foods quickly, and serve immediately so foods don't linger at room temperatures where bacteria can grow.

CHILL. Refrigerate or freeze perishable foods, prepared food and leftovers within two hours. Make sure the refrigerator is set at a temperature of 4°C (40°F), and keep the freezer at -18°C (0°F).