

TOXOPLASMOSIS

Toxoplasmosis is an infectious disease found in some farm animals and household pets. Cats are a carrier of the disease and could possibly transmit it to humans.

People who have contracted toxoplasmosis may exhibit mild, flu-like symptoms. However, the problem is more serious for pregnant women or immunocompromised individuals. An unborn child of a woman infected for the first time during the first trimester of pregnancy may develop birth defects. Immunocompromised individuals developing toxoplasmosis usually have a reactivation of a previous infection.

Although cats can transmit the disease, they are not the major source of infection to humans. People are more likely to pick up toxoplasmosis by handling or eating raw meat or not cleaning up thoroughly after handling the meat. Infected soil can also result in infection after gardening or cleaning out sandboxes. In fact, there is no significant increase in risk of acquiring toxoplasmosis associated with cat ownership.

Cats can get toxoplasmosis from eating raw meat or prey animals such as mice; and cats who hunt stand a greater chance of being exposed or infected. Indoor cats that eat commercial pet food are less likely to get and transmit the disease.

In most cases, cats will show no signs of being infected. However, lethargy, loss of appetite, and fever may indicate early infection with the disease. Other symptoms include difficulty breathing, jaundice, and uveitis - a painful inflammatory reaction in the eye.

Although the parasite develops in cats, not all cats become infected. Most cats develop an immunity to the disease early in life and it is unlikely they will pass it on to humans. When a cat is infected, its owner can be exposed when changing the litter box containing infected feces. This risk can be prevented by cleaning the litter box daily since eggs must sit for at least 24 hours before becoming infective.

If you are considering children, are already pregnant, or if you have an immune system problem, consult your physician on being tested for this disease. A negative test before conception indicates a risk if the mother is exposed to toxoplasmosis during the first trimester. A positive test before conception indicates that the mother is immune and will not transmit the infection to her fetus. Testing cats for toxoplasmosis either through blood or feces is not usually beneficial. It is not usually detected in the feces because cats excrete the eggs for such a short time. The blood tests are usually negative during peak egg excretion. Positive tests indicate previous exposure, but no indication as to whether your cat will excrete the eggs again.

Prevention of toxoplasmosis is easy by following these simple steps:

1. Cook meat thoroughly to over 61 C for 4 minutes or 58 C for 10 minutes. Wash hands and anything else that comes in contact with the raw meat such as cutting boards, knives, and the sink.

2. Someone other than a pregnant woman or immunocompromised person should clean the cat litter every day, if possible. Daily cleaning is important since the feces of an infected cat becomes infectious after 24 hours.
3. Wear rubber, disposable gloves when cleaning the litter box and wash hands thoroughly afterwards.
4. Feed cats dry, canned, or thoroughly cooked food. Keep them from hunting.
5. Cover children's sandboxes when not in use and dispose of any contaminated sand.
6. Wear gloves when working in the garden or with soil, and wash hands thoroughly afterwards.
7. Wash all fruits and vegetables before eating.