

Advice during pregnancy

1. Don't handle or eat raw or undercooked meat (don't even taste it) during pregnancy. Cook all meats thoroughly.
2. Wash all fruit and vegetables thoroughly.
3. Wear gloves when gardening or handling soil or sandpits.
4. Have someone else empty the litter tray on a daily basis.

Pregnant? How to prevent an infection with Toxoplasma



ESCCAP is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that develops guidelines and promotes good practice for the control and treatment of parasites in companion animals. With the proper advice the risk of diseases and parasitic transmission between animals and humans can be minimised. ESCCAP aspires to see a Europe where companion animal parasites no longer threaten the health and wellbeing of animals and humans.

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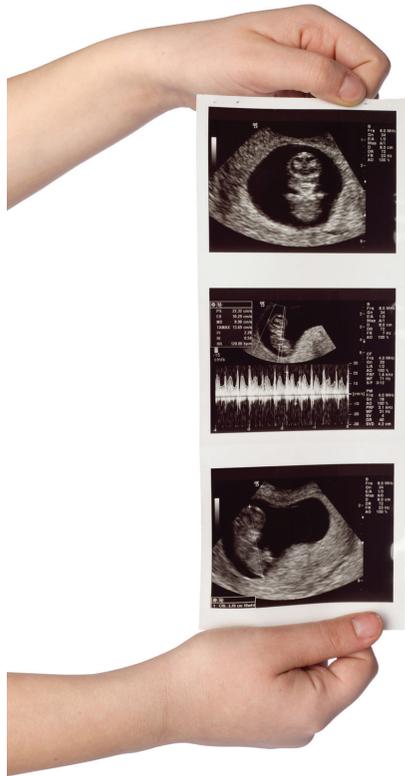
What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by *Toxoplasma gondii*, a microscopic small, single-celled parasite that can infect people. In most cases the infection passes without causing any symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they are quite non-specific and include tiredness, lethargy, swollen glands (lymph nodes), mild fever and a skin rash. In general the symptoms will pass within a few weeks or months. Furthermore, once a person has been infected, he or she becomes immune to the parasite and is therefore unlikely to become infected again (unless an immune disorder is present). Toxoplasmosis is therefore annoying but not serious to most people.

The infection however can be dangerous for persons with immune deficiency and for women that get infected with *Toxoplasma* for the first time during pregnancy. Infection of the unborn child is called congenital toxoplasmosis. The baby becomes infected via the placenta and can develop serious disorders mainly affecting the brain ("water on the brain" - hydrocephalus) and the eyes (blindness). How severely the child is affected depends upon at what stage of pregnancy the infection occurs i.e. the phase of development of the foetus. Sometimes congenital toxoplasmosis can cause miscarriage or a premature birth. The signs of congenital toxoplasmosis are not always visible immediately after birth. Sometimes symptoms don't occur until later in life, especially in the case of vision problems.

The *Toxoplasma* parasite isn't always transferred from the mother to the unborn child during pregnancy. It is estimated that this only happens in around 30% of all cases.

For persons with immune deficiency (transplantation, HIV/AIDS) it is important to know if *Toxoplasma* infection was present in the past. Re-infection is then possible and preventive medication may be necessary.



How do people get infected with *Toxoplasma*?

There are two main ways of contracting toxoplasmosis, eating undercooked meat from infected animals and ingesting fruit, vegetables or soil contaminated by the faeces of infected cats.



Firstly, farm animals including pigs, sheep and cows can be infected with *Toxoplasma* without showing any symptoms. The *Toxoplasma* parasite is present in the muscle tissue and by eating raw or undercooked meat (that was not frozen before) the parasite is able to infect humans.

Secondly the faeces of cats can contain *Toxoplasma* parasites (oocysts). These oocysts are not immediately infectious to other animals after shed in the faeces, but need a few days to become infectious. Therefore it is important to empty your cat's litter tray daily so that oocysts do not have sufficient time to become infectious. Also remember that the outside environment (garden, sandpit and so on) can become contaminated by cat waste. Because the parasites can survive up to 1.5 years in the environment, this will not be recognized as fecal material anymore. So it is essential to wear gloves when gardening. Fruit and vegetables that could be contaminated should be thoroughly washed before eating. Becoming infected by direct contact with cats or other animals is highly unlikely- so stroking your cat or dog should not be a problem.

Many women have not previously been infected with *Toxoplasma* at the time they become pregnant and are therefore not immune to Toxoplasmosis. It is consequently very important for pregnant women to take measures to prevent infection with *Toxoplasma* during pregnancy. A single blood test is not 100% reliable and therefore not always used on a regular basis. Educating women before they become pregnant about how to avoid an infection is clearly the best way to prevent disease and is of vital importance.

