

Protect Against Toxoplasmosis with a Few Simple Steps

When toxoplasmosis and pregnancy enter the same conversation fear washes over the pregnant woman who is bombarded with the dos and don'ts of preparing for the birth of her child. "Something else that can harm my unborn baby," she thinks. Firmly entrenched in the motherly instinct, there is nothing she will not do to protect her child, including racing home to get rid of the beloved family cat. **STOP!** While toxoplasmosis is a concern because it can infect the fetus, a few simple steps can protect against it.

Although it is possible to get toxoplasmosis from undercooked lamb and pork, Dwight Bowman, PhD, Associate Professor of Parasitology at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, believes it is most commonly transmitted through cats. "My feeling is that it must be coming from cats because in the United States because we don't eat rare mutton or pork and it doesn't exist in beef," he said. Therefore, protecting against exposure to toxoplasmosis during pregnancy includes appropriate care of the family feline, and more specifically, the family feline's feces.

According to a Cornell Feline Health Center brochure, Toxoplasmosis in cats, one way cats may acquire toxoplasma infection is by eating infected rodents and birds. "The organisms multiply in the wall of the small intestine and produce oocysts, which are the excreted in great numbers in the feces for two to three weeks. This is why pregnant women are advised not to change the cat litter. "They should use every excuse they can think of not to change the litter box," Bowman said, "It's the best way to avoid exposure."

Many pregnant women who have owned and lived with cats throughout their lives have already been exposed Toxoplasma gondii, the single-celled parasite that causes toxoplasmosis. With exposure, comes immunity and the risk of passing the disease from mother to the fetus is removed, according to Marguerite Frongillo, PhD, teaching support specialist at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "A routine blood test will show if a woman is immune," Frongillo said. "I recommend that all pregnant women have it done." If you have antibodies, that is a good thing; if you are inadvertently exposed during pregnancy, then it is virtually impossible for your baby to become infected. If you don't have antibodies, you need to be extra careful to protect yourself and follow the guidelines listed below.

Don't

1. Change the cat litter
2. Put cat litter in compost
3. Introduce a new kitten into you home
4. Eat undercooked meat, especially lamb and pork
5. Eat or drink un-pasteurized dairy products

Do

1. Protect your cats from infection by keeping them indoors
2. Wear rubber gloves when gardening and if you must change the litter
3. Talk to your obstetrician about having a toxoplasmosis test
4. Wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating them
5. Wash your hands after handling raw meat
6. Cover children's sandboxes

Not every medical doctor has a clear understanding of the cat's role in transmission of toxoplasma, Frongillo said. "Recently a friend told me that her doctor suggested that she rid of her cat when she became pregnant," she says. "It's a warning pregnant women hear and it isn't necessary."

The Feline Health Center brochure states: "Toxoplasma infection of the fetus is least common (but disease is least severe, often without symptoms) if the maternal infection occurs during the third trimester." Problems associated with fetal infection of toxoplasma range from mild to severe, with most babies having only minor rashes or eye infections, Bowman said. "But they can also develop severe neurological disease, or later in life have mental deficits or retinitis (inflammation of the retina)." A vaccine that prevents the shedding of oocysts by cats has received considerable attention, but is not yet available, Bowman says. It is called an "altruistic vaccine" he explained, because "it does little to prevent disease in the cat but rather is designed to prevent disease in humans."

Pet owners might also consider having their cats tested, too. If they test negative, then they are probably susceptible to infection; they could then shed the parasite in their stool for a short period of time if they become infected. But if they are tested positive (meaning they've already been exposed), they are unlikely to ever again shed organisms and would be the safest cats of all.

Both Bowman and Frongillo emphasize that preventing measures are so simple to follow and should be part of every day health habits anyway-like washing your hands after changing the litter box-that there is no reason to panic. "Just have your partner do it," Frongillo said. "That's the best protection there is." And if he thinks you're just making it up to spend nine months free of the chore just show him this article.