

Toxoplasma and Human Pregnancy

Toxoplasma gondii is a protozoan parasite that infects virtually all warm-blooded animals including humans. Domestic cats are the definitive host for the parasite but infection does not necessarily result from contact with cats or cat faeces. When cats become infected with toxoplasmosis they pass unsporulated (non-infectious) oocysts (eggs) in faeces for 1 – 2 weeks. These non-infectious eggs mature in 1 – 5 days to become infectious (sporulated oocysts) and the sporulated oocysts survive for months to years. People can become infected by ingestion of these sporulated oocysts in contaminated soil or water. People can also become infected from ingesting the tissue cysts in meat. When animals (and people) become infected with toxoplasmosis, they may end up having tissue cysts in their body. Ingestion of poorly cooked meat (usually pork, goat or lamb) or failing to wash hands thoroughly after handling raw meat is probably the most common means of human infection with toxoplasmosis. The majority of people never realise that they have been infected as the signs are self limiting fever, enlarged lymph glands and malaise (just not feeling well). However, toxoplasmosis can cause serious disease in the unborn foetus, a major concern for pregnant women, and can also cause severe disease in immunosuppressed people.. In immunosuppressed people, infection is usually due to a reactivation of tissue cysts in the person's own body (eg from prior chronic infection not new infection). In pregnant women, infection of the foetus occurs after acute (new) infection. Stillbirths and serious foetal damage (especially eye and brain damage) can result. Touching cats is an extremely unlikely way to acquire toxoplasmosis and because of this, there is no correlation with toxoplasmosis and cat ownership. Similarly, veterinary health care providers are no more likely than the general population to be infected with toxoplasmosis, and people with HIV infection who own cats are no more likely to acquire toxoplasmosis than those who do not. There is one obvious conclusion from this:

THERE IS NO REASON TO REMOVE CATS FROM THE HOUSES AND LIVES OF PREGNANT WOMEN.

There is every reason to take sensible precautions:

1. Wear gloves when gardening and wash hands thoroughly after any gardening.
2. Wash any produce from the garden very carefully.
3. Gloves should be worn whenever raw meat is handled and hands washed thoroughly afterwards.
4. Litter boxes should be cleaned daily to prevent any sporulated oocysts (it takes at least 1 day for eggs to become infective). Removing sporulated (infective) oocysts is very difficult but if oocysts do not have time to sporulate, it is not a problem.
5. Ideally, immunosuppressed people or pregnant women should not be cleaning the litter box but where this is impractical, ensure any faeces are removed promptly, ensure the litter box is not left longer than 24 hours before cleaning, use gloves when cleaning the litter box and wash hands thoroughly after removing the gloves.
6. Washing hands thoroughly after any cat or dog handling (dogs that roll in faeces can carry oocysts on their coat).

NO CAT SHOULD EVER HAVE TO BE EUTHANASED OR REHOMED DUE TO HUMAN PREGNANCY.