



# Toxoplasmosis

## What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is a disease found in birds and mammals worldwide. The infection is caused by a parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*. It infects about 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 symptoms. A healthy person's immune system usually prevents the parasite from causing disease.

Those who do get sick with a mild form of the illness usually have flu-like symptoms such as fever, sore throat, headache, sore muscles and tiredness. Glands in the neck, armpits or groin can become swollen but they are usually not sore. In some cases the infection can also cause blurred vision or temporary loss of vision.

People undergoing therapy such as chemotherapy or radiation, or who have a weakened immune system due to HIV or other disease may develop more severe disease, such as damage to the brain, eyes, heart or other organs.

## How is toxoplasmosis spread?

All animals and birds can become infected with *Toxoplasma*. The parasite enters the muscles of a bird or animal when it eats raw meat, or drinks the milk of an infected animal. Cats can also spread the parasite through their feces. The infection cannot be spread from person to person, except in the circumstance of a mother passing the infection on to her developing baby.

Common ways for people to become infected with toxoplasmosis include:

- touching your hands to your mouth after cleaning a cat's litter box or after touching anything that has come into contact with cat feces;
- eating raw or undercooked meats;
- drinking unpasteurized milk;
- touching your hands to your mouth after working in gardens or playing in sandboxes that contain cat or other feline animal feces; or
- accidentally swallowing contaminated dirt in the playground.

Other, less common, ways for people to become infected with toxoplasmosis include:

- drinking water contaminated with *Toxoplasma*; or
- receiving an infected organ transplant or blood transfusion - this is very rare.

## Pregnancy and toxoplasmosis

If you are pregnant or thinking of becoming pregnant, be sure to follow the advice in this HealthLinkBC File on how to avoid infection. A growing fetus can become infected with *Toxoplasma* if the mother is infected with the parasite while pregnant.

The woman may not have symptoms, but infection of the fetus early in pregnancy can result in miscarriage, poor growth, early delivery or stillbirth. If a child is born with toxoplasmosis, they can experience eye problems, hydrocephalus (water on the brain), convulsions or mental disabilities.

Your health care provider may test you for *Toxoplasma*. Treatment of an infected, pregnant woman may prevent or lessen the disease in her developing baby. Treatment of an infected infant also helps reduce the severity of the disease as the child grows.

## How can I avoid getting toxoplasmosis?

You can avoid getting toxoplasmosis by following this advice:

- Be careful not to accidentally swallow dust when cleaning the cat litter box.
- If possible, avoid cleaning cat litter box if you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant. If no one else can perform the task, wear disposable gloves and wash your hands with soap and warm water afterwards.
- Wear gloves when cleaning the cat litter box, and then wash your hands.
- If you have a sandbox, place a secure lid on it to prevent cats from using it as a litter box.
- Do not eat raw or undercooked meat.
- Wash your hands, utensils and cutting boards after handling raw meat to prevent contaminating other foods.
- Do not drink unpasteurized milk from any animal.
- Wear gloves when gardening, and wash your hands afterwards.
- People who have a weak immune system, and are concerned about the quality of the water in their community should consult with their health care provider about whether they should be treating their drinking water or using bottled water.

## Cats and toxoplasmosis

Your pet cat can pass disease on to you through their feces. Most cats infected with

toxoplasmosis do not appear sick. The cat's feces contain the parasite for only 2 weeks after the cat is infected. However, the feces themselves may remain infectious in the environment for over a year.

Indoor cats that have never hunted and are not fed raw meat are less likely to be infected.

Here are some tips if you have a pet cat:

- Wash your hands after patting, brushing or being licked by your cat.
- Keep your cat indoors.
- Clean out the litter box every day. The *Toxoplasma* parasite does not become infectious until 1 to 5 days after it is shed in a cat's feces.
- Dispose of cat feces in a plastic bag and put in the garbage.
- Do not compost the cat litter, or dispose of the litter near your garden.
- See a veterinarian if there are any signs of illness in your cat.
- Feed your cat commercial dry or canned food, not raw or undercooked meats.

## Is there a treatment for toxoplasmosis?

Most people will recover from toxoplasmosis without treatment. However, medication is available from your health care provider to treat the infection. Treatment may be required if the eyes or heart are affected or if the infection occurs in people who are pregnant, have a weak immune system, or have illnesses such as HIV/AIDS or cancer.



BC Centre for Disease Control  
An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority