

Fact Sheet: Toxoplasmosis

What is Toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by a parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*. As many as 60 million people in the U.S. may be infected but very few of them will have any symptoms. A healthy person's immune system usually keeps the parasite from causing illness. In pregnant women and persons who are immune compromised, toxoplasmosis can cause serious health problems.

What are the symptoms?

- The symptoms vary. Most people who are infected do not have any symptoms.
- Some people may have influenza-like symptoms (swollen lymph glands, muscle aches) that may last several months.
- Severe illness may cause damage to the brain, eyes, or other organs.
- Infants infected in the womb usually have no symptoms at birth but a small percentage may have serious eye or brain damage. Some infected newborns may develop symptoms later in life.
- Symptoms of eye involvement may include reduced vision, blurred vision, pain (from bright lights), eye redness, and sometimes tearing.

How is it spread?

- Eating undercooked, contaminated meat (especially pork, lamb, and venison).
- Eating food prepared with contaminated knives, kitchen utensils, and cutting boards.
- Drinking water contaminated with *Toxoplasma*.
- Accidentally swallowing the parasite by coming in contact with contaminated cat feces while changing the cat litter, or by touching or eating anything that has come in contact with the contaminated cat feces.
- Passing it from mother to baby during pregnancy.

How is the disease treated?

For pregnant women and persons with a weakened immune system there are medications available. Healthy persons who are not pregnant do not usually need treatment. If you think you might have toxoplasmosis, contact your healthcare provider.

How is it prevented?

- Cook food to safe temperatures.
 - Beef, lamb, veal roasts and steaks should be 145°F throughout.
 - Pork, ground meat, and wild game should be cooked to 160°F.
 - Whole chickens should be cooked to 180°F.
- Peel and wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly before eating.
- Wash cutting boards, dishes, counters, utensils and hands with hot soapy water after contact with raw meat, poultry, seafood, or unwashed fruits and vegetables.
- Freeze meat for several days before cooking to reduce the chances of infection.
- Wear gloves when gardening because of the possible exposure to cat feces.
- If you are pregnant or have a weakened immune system:
 - Avoid changing the litter box, if possible.
 - Keep your cat indoors.
 - Do not adopt or handle stray cats, especially kittens.
 - Do not get a new cat.
 - Feed cats only commercial canned or dried food.
 - Cover outdoor sandboxes.
 - Have someone else change the litter box daily; the *Toxoplasma* parasite doesn't become infectious until 1-5 days after it is shed in the cat feces.
- Cats only spread *Toxoplasma* in their feces for a few weeks after becoming infected. They usually don't have symptoms and the infection will go away without treatment.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

