

Keep 'Em Both

Put your worries to rest: Babies and cats can peacefully co-exist.

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When pregnant with my son Ethan, I was a junior in veterinary school and my imagination ran rampant with worries that a zoonotic disease - one transferred from animal to person - might strike my unborn baby. Could Vixen, my loyal, shorthaired calico cat, my companion and comforter, endanger the new life inside me?

A new baby should mark a time of joy for your family. But for some cats, this means the loss of their homes. The truth is, cats, pregnant women and new babies can safely co-exist. You just need to know the risks and how to avoid them.

Avoid RisksOne risk many new parents face is toxoplasmosis. Cases of this disease are extremely rare, but the consequences are serious.

Toxoplasmosis is a parasitic protozoa that can infect other species, in addition to cats. Infected cats are usually asymptomatic, but do shed a large number of the protozoas eggs until their immune systems control the infection. Once a cat develops protozoa antibodies, it ceases to be infective for the rest of its life.

Most human toxoplasmosis infections are non-threatening. If the persons immune system gains quick control, he or she is protected for life. People with diseases such as AIDS or who take drugs that suppress the immune system are at risk for toxoplasmosis. The threat to unborn babies is that a fetus immature immune system cannot protect it yet. The protozoa can cross the placenta and infect the unborn baby.

That said, exposure to toxoplasmosis is easily preventable. The protozoa take up to five days after leaving the cat to become infective, so scoop your cats litterbox daily.

A pregnant woman should wash her hands after playing with her cat and avoid the cats litterbox while she's pregnant, said Drew Weigner, DVM, a feline veterinary specialist at The Cat Doctor in Atlanta. If there is no one to take over the litterbox duties, moms should wear gloves and change the litterbox daily.

You can get tested to see if you have protective antibodies against toxoplasmosis, but even if you are not at risk, these precautions are beneficial.