

Toxoplasmosis

This disease is dangerous to pregnant women, but the right precautions can prevent transmission.

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One of the dangers a cat owner can face if she becomes pregnant is toxoplasmosis. Caused by a protozoan called *Toxoplasma gondii* that a cat can pass in its feces, this infection can affect a fetus's brain and nervous system.

A cat ingests the protozoan by eating the raw meat of infected birds or rodents, making the condition more common in outdoor cats. If a human handles an infected cat's stool, either by cleaning the litterbox or by working in soil where the cat has eliminated, and then accidentally ingests the feces or soil, the parasite may enter the person's bloodstream. If a pregnant woman becomes infected, she may transmit the disease to her fetus. The biggest danger is during the first trimester, when the disease can cause seizures, brain inflammation, brain and liver enlargement and mild to severe retardation in the baby. It can also cause vision problems, eye diseases and, later, blindness.

If you're pregnant, be sure to tell your obstetrician that you have a cat. The doctor should run a toxoplasmosis antibody titer, a simple blood test that measures antibody levels for past and present infection. Previous exposure to the disease will cause a positive titer, which means you are immune. You can no longer contract the disease or pass it to your unborn child. A negative titer means you are at risk for contracting the disease in the future and must take the proper precautions when caring for your cat.

Ideally, you should hand over litterbox duty to your husband or another family member for the next nine months. If that isn't possible, be sure to wear rubber gloves when cleaning the litterbox and to wash your hands carefully afterward. Because the parasite's eggs hatch and become infectious within three days, daily changing of the litterbox and removal of feces is recommended. If you work outdoors in soil, always wear gloves, and wash your hands when you get inside.

If a pregnant woman is ill with symptoms of toxoplasmosis, which include enlargement of the lymph nodes, rash, fever, muscle pain and fatigue, the doctor will run a toxoplasmosis titer. Because the symptoms may be mild or resemble the flu or other infections, toxoplasmosis is sometimes difficult to diagnose. If tests show the woman has been exposed to the parasite, she must immediately undergo antibiotic treatments.