



Royal Animal Hospital – Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasmosis is one of the commonest infections in the world. Almost all cases are extremely mild and go undiagnosed, resembling mild flu.



Many women are told by their friends or even their physicians to avoid contact with cats during pregnancy but it is important to know that cats are not a high risk source of toxoplasmosis infection. Many more people are exposed to the parasite by ingesting raw or undercooked meats, and avoiding meat or cooking it thoroughly is a better way to avoid the disease than steering clear of felines. If you do have a cat, daily cleaning of the litter tray will remove any toxoplasmosis before it can be infective (*it takes*

1-5 days development outside the cat before it becomes infective). Sensible hygiene measures remove any remaining risk. You certainly do not have to get rid of your cat.

One third to one half of the population has had toxoplasmosis without even knowing it, usually from poorly prepared food. In most people it causes a mild syndrome that disappears within two or three days, often mistaken with a mild dose of flu. In one sense you are lucky if you are one of the people who has had toxoplasmosis (a blood test can determine this) because you will be immune and cannot get the disease again. Your immunity will also protect your unborn child. Most at risk is the unborn child of the woman who has never had toxoplasmosis*. She can contract the disease, usually from undercooked or improperly handled meat or improperly prepared vegetables, and pass it to her unborn baby where blindness, epilepsy or even death can occur.

Note: Women who keep cats are at no greater risk of catching toxoplasmosis than women who do not keep cats.

Normal hygiene measures are good for prevention of many diseases including toxoplasmosis and should be practiced by everyone -- especially pregnant women.

1. Wash your hands before eating
2. Do not eat any raw or uncooked meat.
3. Thoroughly wash vegetables and fruits before consumption.
4. Do not eat cat faeces or material contaminated by cat faeces

5. You can have your cat tested by your veterinarian to be sure she is free of infection**. Once tested, keep her indoors so that she won't eat infected meat. Also, do not feed your cat any raw meat.
- **NOTE: Cat faeces are only infective for 14 days after a cat has caught the disease from a mouse or other host. After 14 days the cat is immune and its faeces are perfectly safe with regard to transmission of toxoplasmosis.**
 - **NOTE: Indoor cats that eat cat food and do not hunt cannot get toxoplasmosis.**
 - **NOTE: Because of the way cats clean themselves and bury their faeces it is extremely unlikely that they will pass infection to a human.**
 - **As a final precaution, change litter trays daily. Wear rubber gloves and wash your hands thoroughly following the daily task. You cannot get toxoplasmosis other than by directly ingesting an infective stage of the parasite by mouth. You cannot get toxoplasmosis "through the air".**

Also discuss toxoplasmosis with your personal physician, who will probably recommend performing a titer, a simple blood test that indicates previous or existing exposure to toxoplasmosis. Remember that a positive titre shows that you have been exposed before (as have 1/3 to 1/2 of the population) and therefore cannot get a problem.

Some European countries routinely test non-immune women on a monthly basis throughout pregnancy. If infection is detected treatment is started immediately and risks to the foetus are largely averted by this screening method. In the United Kingdom and USA it is felt that toxoplasmosis is too rare to justify the expense of routine screening. Also, in the USA the drugs used in treating infection if discovered are not yet licensed by the FDA (although other countries, such as France, do use treatments where indicated)

Notes;

* Also at risk are immuno-compromised people such as AIDS sufferers or people on immuno-suppressive drugs such as cortisone or some anti-cancer medications.

** Test results in cats are questionable and interpretation controversial. In fact, a positive, healthy cat is probably safer than a negative cat since it has already been exposed and is immune. A negative healthy cat can be protected by preventing hunting (keeping indoors) and avoiding raw or undercooked meats.

As stated previously, improper food preparation is the greatest risk in transmission of toxoplasmosis to humans.

With a few sensible precautions, many of which apply to the prevention of diseases in general, you can have a safe pregnancy and still enjoy your pet feline.