

## Is treatment available?



Women who become infected during pregnancy can be treated with medications. Mother and baby should be monitored closely during the pregnancy and after the baby is born. See your health care provider if you have questions about toxoplasmosis.

The best way to protect your unborn child is by protecting yourself against toxoplasmosis.

- Wash your hands with soap and water after any exposure to soil, sand, raw meat, or unwashed vegetables.
- Cook your meat completely (no pink should be seen and the juices should be clear). The internal temperature of the meat should reach 160°F.
- Do not sample meat until it is cooked.
- Freeze meat for several days before cooking to greatly reduce the chance of infection.
- Wash all cutting boards and knives thoroughly with hot soapy water after each use.
- Wash and/or peel all fruits and vegetables before eating them.
- Wear gloves when gardening or handling sand from a sandbox. Wash hands well afterward.
- Avoid drinking untreated water, particularly when traveling in less developed countries.

## Do I have to give up my cat if I am pregnant or planning on becoming pregnant?

No, you do not have to give up your cat if you are pregnant or planning on becoming pregnant. Follow these helpful tips to help you reduce your risk of exposing yourself to *Toxoplasma*:

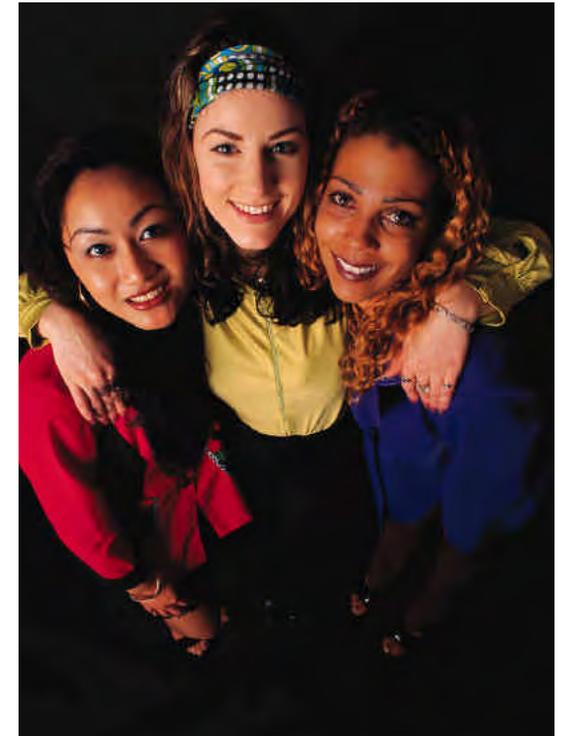
- Have someone else change the litter box if possible. If you have to change it, wear disposable gloves and wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water afterwards.
- Change the litter box daily because the parasite does not become infectious until 1 to 5 days after it is shed in the feces.
- Feed your cat commercial dry or canned food.
- Never feed cats raw meat because this can be a source of *Toxoplasma* infection.
- Keep indoor cats indoors.
- Avoid stray cats, especially kittens.
- Cover your outdoor sandboxes.
- Do not get a new cat while you are pregnant.

Toxoplasmosis also affects persons with weakened immune systems. For more information about toxoplasmosis, contact your health care provider, veterinarian, or local health department.

Also, visit the CDC website at:  
[www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/toxoplasmosis](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/toxoplasmosis)

*This brochure was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and in collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Health. February 2003.*

# Toxoplasmosis: An Important Message for Women



## What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis (Tox-o-plaz-mo-sis) is an infection caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. More than 60 million people in the United States probably carry the *Toxoplasma* parasite, but very few have symptoms because the immune system usually keeps the parasite from causing illness. However, expectant mothers should be cautious because an infection can cause problems in pregnancy.

## How can it affect my unborn child?



If you are pregnant and become infected with the parasite for the first time during or just before your pregnancy, you can pass the infection to your unborn child even if you do not have any symptoms. Most infants who are infected while in the womb have no symptoms at birth but later in life may develop serious symptoms, such as blindness or mental retardation. A small percentage of infected newborns have serious eye or brain damage at birth.

## How is toxoplasmosis spread?



Cats play an important role in the spread of toxoplasmosis. They become infected by eating infected rodents, birds, or other small animals. The parasite is then passed in the cat's feces. Kittens and young cats can shed millions of parasites in their feces for as long as 3 weeks after infection. Mature cats are less likely to shed *Toxoplasma*. Cats and kittens prefer litter boxes, garden soils, and sand boxes for elimination, and you may be exposed unintentionally by touching your mouth after

changing a litter box, or while gardening without gloves. Fruits and vegetables can be contaminated with soil or water, and you can be infected by eating them if they are not washed or peeled.



Animals such as pig, sheep, and deer become infected with *Toxoplasma* by eating feed contaminated with cat feces. The parasite forms cysts in the muscle of food animals. People can be infected by eating under-cooked meat and even by handling raw meat that contains the cysts and not washing their hands afterwards.

## How do I know if I have been infected?

Your health care provider may suggest a blood test to check for antibodies to *Toxoplasma* if you are pregnant or have a weakened immune system.

## When should I be concerned?

Generally if a woman has been infected with *Toxoplasma* before becoming pregnant, the infant will be protected because the mother is immune. Some experts suggest waiting for 6 months after a recent infection to become pregnant. See your health care provider if you have questions about *Toxoplasma* and pregnancy.

