

Cats and toxoplasmosis



Toxoplasma gondii is a parasitic organism which occurs widely in the human and animal population. In the majority of cases it causes few or no problems and its ability to spread is very limited. However a few myths exist and it's important to dispel these (with a scientific evidence base). Thousands of cats are needlessly abandoned or given up because owners are given the wrong advice. This leaflet uses science and an understanding of the organism to correct some of the myths.

In respect of pet cats and particularly the risk during pregnancy:

- Cats only shed (spread) the disease for 2 weeks in their lives. The chances are that if you have had your cat for a while, and/or it's an adult cat, it is no longer infectious anyway.
- Around 30-50% of humans have already got a natural or acquired immunity to toxoplasmosis already so will be unaffected if exposed again —if you have had contact with cats before, you may well be immune.
- Cat faeces are only a risk if handled directly and if hands are not washed, and only become a source of risk between 1 and 5 days after the cat has defecated. In other words, cat faeces less than 24 hours old, and not brought into contact with mouth or eyes, is no risk. Cleaning a litter tray daily and washing your hands afterwards (or just wearing gloves) presents no risk; even better, get someone else to do it.
- Toxoplasma only presents a risk to unborn babies in the first 3 months of pregnancy—thereafter, there is no risk to the unborn baby, and there is no risk at all if the above hygiene precautions are taken.



Did you know that statistically, cat owners are no more likely to get Toxoplasmosis than non-cat owners, and in fact you're more likely to get the disease from handling raw meat than from your cat.

(source—Cats Protection UK research, 2011)



- It may be a risk to those with a very weakened immune system if sensible hygiene precautions are not taken.
- There can be a higher risk from handling raw meat, eating poorly cooked meat, or eating unwashed vegetables. Avoid feeding your cat raw meat and make sure you buy your own meat from a reliable source and cook it properly.
- Keep outdoor sandpits covered, and when gardening, wear gloves in case a cat toilets there.
- There is minimal risk from a mature neutered colony, and since the cats only shed the virus for 2 weeks of their lives, it is better to have a neutered, stable group of cats who maintain their own territory, than to try and remove cats by other means and end up with a continually young population that sheds the disease.