



TOXOPLASMOSIS

What is toxoplasmosis?

A single-celled parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii* causes the infection known as Toxoplasmosis. The parasite is found throughout the world and can live a long time, possibly even a lifetime, in humans and other animals. In the United States, more than 40 million people may be infected with the *Toxoplasma* parasite.

Who gets toxoplasmosis?

Anyone can get toxoplasmosis. People most likely to develop severe illness are:

- Infants born to mothers who are newly infected with *Toxoplasma gondii* during or just before pregnancy
- Persons with severely weakened immune systems, such as individuals with AIDS, those taking certain types of chemotherapy, and those who recently received an organ transplant.

How is toxoplasmosis spread?

A *Toxoplasma* infection occurs by one of the following:

- Eating undercooked, contaminated meat (especially pork, lamb, and venison) or shellfish (for example, oysters, clams, or mussels)
- Accidental ingestion of undercooked, contaminated meat or shellfish after handling them and not washing hands thoroughly (*Toxoplasma* cannot be absorbed through intact skin.)
- Eating food that was contaminated by knives, utensils, cutting boards and other foods that had contact with raw, contaminated meat or shellfish
- Drinking water contaminated with *Toxoplasma gondii*
- Accidentally swallowing the parasite through contact with cat feces (stools) that contain *Toxoplasma*. This might happen by:
 - Cleaning a cat's litter box when the cat has shed *Toxoplasma* in its feces
 - Touching or ingesting anything that came into contact with infected cat feces
 - Accidentally ingesting contaminated soil, such as not washing hands after gardening or eating unwashed fruits or vegetables from a garden.
- Mother-to-child (congenital) transmission
- Receiving an infected organ transplant or infected blood via transfusion, though this is rare.

Office of Infectious Disease Epidemiology
24/7 Emergency Contact Number: 1-888-295-5156



What are the symptoms of toxoplasmosis?

- Most people who become infected with *Toxoplasma gondii* are not aware of it because they have no symptoms.
- Some people who have toxoplasmosis may feel as if they have the “flu” with swollen lymph glands or muscle aches and pains that may last for a month or more.
- Severe toxoplasmosis, causing damage to the brain, eyes, or other organs, can develop from an acute *Toxoplasma* infection or one that had occurred earlier in life and is now reactivated. Severe toxoplasmosis is more likely in individuals who have weak immune systems, though occasionally, even persons with healthy immune systems may experience eye damage from toxoplasmosis.
- Most infants who are infected while still in the womb have no symptoms at birth, but they may develop symptoms later in life. A small percentage of infected newborns have serious eye or brain damage at birth.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of the infection vary. Most people who become infected with *Toxoplasma* are not aware of it. Some people who have toxoplasmosis may feel as if they have the “flu” with swollen lymph nodes or muscle aches and pains that last for a month or more.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

It is not required to exclude an individual diagnosed with toxoplasmosis from work or school.

What is the treatment for toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is treated primarily with antibacterial and anti-parasitic drugs for about four weeks; however, most people recover from toxoplasmosis without treatment.

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of toxoplasmosis?

To prevent infection of cats:

- Keep cats indoors to prevent them from hunting and eating wild rodents and birds.
- Feed cats only commercially prepared food or well-cooked meat, never raw meat or raw meat products.



Frequently Asked Questions

To prevent infection of humans:

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after handling uncooked meat and before eating.
- Wash all cutting boards, sink tops, knives, and other utensils that contact uncooked meat with soap and water.
- Cook meat thoroughly to an internal temperature of 160 degrees Fahrenheit to destroy any parasites that might be present. Avoid tasting while cooking.
- Wash vegetables thoroughly before eating to remove soil that may be contaminated with cat feces.
- Dispose of cat litter every day before any eggs have time to become infective. Cat boxes and litter should be handled by someone other than a pregnant woman or those who are immunocompromised.
- Wear gloves while gardening, especially where cats may have defecated.
- Cover children's sandboxes when not in use to prevent cats from defecating in them.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/toxoplasmosis/gen_info/faqs.html#signs