

Toxoplasmosis and Pregnancy

What is Toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by a parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*. For most, toxoplasmosis is not a dangerous infection and people recover with no treatment. If a pregnant woman becomes infected and passes the infection on to the developing baby, it could result in miscarriage or birth defects.

What are the symptoms?

There are usually no symptoms. When they do occur, they include fever, sore throat, tiredness, muscle pain and swollen glands in the neck.

How is it spread?

People get toxoplasmosis by:

- Eating the parasite eggs.** People can consume the parasite eggs by eating unwashed fruits or vegetables, eating with contaminated hands, eating anything that has touched cat feces from an infected cat.
- Eating the meat of an infected animal** (especially pork, lamb and venison) that is not fully cooked or has not been previously frozen.
- Fetal infection.** Developing babies can be infected if a woman becomes infected during pregnancy. If you have already developed immunity to toxoplasmosis before pregnancy, you cannot get infected again or pass the infection on to your developing baby.

What is the test for Toxoplasmosis?

A blood test is used to see whether you have the antibody to the toxoplasma parasite. If you have the antibody, that means you have already been infected, and your immune system makes antibodies against toxoplasma. These antibodies protect the developing baby and newborn from infection.

In Canada fetal infection with toxoplasmosis is rare, so it is not included in routine prenatal screening.

Risk to the developing baby

- If the developing baby is infected during the first half of pregnancy, toxoplasmosis is most likely to cause brain damage, eye damage or blindness.
- If the developing baby is infected later in pregnancy, toxoplasmosis is less likely to cause serious problems but treatment is important to prevent future problems from the infection.

Treatment

If you get toxoplasmosis while you are pregnant, you will take antibiotics. This may protect your fetus from infection.

If the newborn is infected, they need antibiotics for the first year of life to lower the risk of brain damage and blindness from the infection.

Prevention

- ✓ **Avoid contact with cat feces.**
 - Wear gloves and wash your hands after working in the garden.
 - Change cat litter boxes daily to avoid contact with infective eggs. Avoid cleaning litter boxes if possible during pregnancy.
 - Cover sand boxes when not in use.

- ✓ **Eat only well cooked or previously frozen meat.** Avoid dried meats, such as beef jerky.
 - Meat should be cooked to reach a temperature of:
 - Whole poultry - 82°C/180°F
 - Food mixtures that includes poultry, egg, meat or fish - 74°C/165°F
 - Pork, ground meat other than poultry - 71°C/160°F
 - Fish - 70°C/158°F

- ✓ **Wash your hands before eating and after handling raw meat,** poultry, seafood, fruits, or vegetables.

- ✓ **Wash fruits and vegetables** and/or peel the skin before eating them.

- ✓ **Wash all food preparation surfaces and then sanitize with a bleach water solution.** Use a solution of 1ml (1/4 teaspoon) of unscented household bleach to 500ml (2 cups) of water.

For more information contact the Infectious Disease Control Team at
519-663-5317 ext. 2330 or go to www.healthunit.com

Information Adapted from:
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. "Toxoplasmosis"
<http://www.cdc.gov/toxoplasmosis/>

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