

## How can I protect myself from infection? (cont'd)

- Wash your hands with soap and water after handling soil, sand, raw meat, or unwashed vegetables.
- Do not taste meat until it is cooked.
- Wash all cutting boards, utensils and surfaces thoroughly with hot soapy water after each use, and especially after contact with raw meat.
- Wash and/or peel all fruits and vegetables before eating them.
- Avoid unpasteurised goats milk
- Limit your exposure to cat litter and soil contaminated with cat faeces
- Cover children's outdoor sandboxes to prevent cats from using them as litter boxes.
- Wear gloves when gardening or handling sand from a sandbox. Wash hands well afterward.
- Try to limit your contact with stray cats, especially kittens.
- Avoid contact with sheep at lambing time
- Avoid handling dirty clothing used by those handling lambing ewes and newborn lambs

## I own a cat. Do I have to give up my cat while pregnant?

*If you own a cat, you do not need to give up your cat while pregnant or planning to become pregnant, but the following extra precautions can help reduce your risk of exposure to Toxoplasma*

- Provide a litter tray for your cat to prevent fouling of garden soil and sandpits
- It is advisable to change the litter tray daily because the parasite does not become infectious until 1 to 5 days after it is shed in cat faeces.
- If possible, have someone else change your cat's litter box. If you have to change it, wear disposable gloves and wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water afterwards.
- Feed your cat commercial dry or canned food. Don't feed cats raw meat because this can be a source of *Toxoplasma* infection.
- During your pregnancy, try and keep your cat indoors and away from dead animals and birds.
- Prevent cats hunting birds and other prey, e.g. by use of a bell collar.
- Do not get a new cat while you are pregnant.

<http://www.hpsc.ie/hpsc/A-Z/Zoonotic/Toxoplasmosis/>

Based on CDC, HPA, HSE-SE and HSE-M leaflets

# Toxoplasmosis and Pregnancy



## What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. In various parts of the world, between 10% and 50% of people carry the *Toxoplasma* parasite, but very few have symptoms because the immune system usually keeps the parasite from causing illness. However, pregnant women should be careful because an infection can cause harm to their baby.

## 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?

Animals such as pigs, sheep, and deer become infected with *Toxoplasma* by eating feed contaminated with cat faeces. 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.

Cats play an important role in the spread of toxoplasmosis, and contact with cat faeces more than a day old carries a risk of infection for humans. Cats become infected by eating infected rodents, birds, or other small animals. The parasite is then passed in the cat's faeces. Kittens and young cats can shed millions of parasites in their faeces for as long as 3 weeks after infection. Mature cats are less likely to shed *Toxoplasma*. In addition to litter boxes, cats and kittens tend to foul garden soils and sand boxes, 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.

*Toxoplasma* is also one of the main causes of abortion in sheep, and people can become infected through contact with lambing ewes.

## How do I know if I or my child have been infected?

A simple blood test will let you know if you have been infected. Babies born in Ireland were tested as part of a 2-year pilot screening programme which ran from July 2005 to June 2007. Further information on this screening programme can be obtained

from The Rotunda Hospital, Dublin or the National Newborn Screening Laboratory.

## Is infection always potentially harmful?

Generally if a woman has been infected with *Toxoplasma* before becoming pregnant, the infant will be protected because the mother is immune.

## Is treatment available?

Women who become infected during pregnancy can be treated with medication. Treatment is also available for affected babies to reduce the occurrence of problems in later life. [Further information can be obtained from The Rotunda Hospital, Dublin or the National Newborn Screening Laboratory]

## How can I protect myself from infection?

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

- Cook your meat completely (no pink should be seen and the juices should be clear). Do not eat undercooked or rare meats.