

Toxoplasmosis

When the pregnant cat owner first encounters this word while leafing through a book about mothers-to-be, she feels a stab in the pit of her stomach. Reading on only increases her feelings of dread: "A pregnant woman can get it from a cat... She can pass it on to her developing baby... It can cause birth defects". While there is a reason for concern, there's no need to panic, say veterinarians and gynecologists.

"Doctors used to say the woman should get rid of the cat, but that's totally unnecessary" says Dr. Michael Davidson, associate professor of companion animal and special species medicine at North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine. The only way a woman can get toxoplasmosis from a cat is through direct contact with its feces, which most people try to avoid anyway! A few simple precautions are all that's needed to prevent exposure to this parasite during pregnancy.

Some 80 percent of domestic cats are exposed to toxoplasmosis during their lives, usually as a result of eating a mouse, mole, squirrel or other infected prey. Some cats show no symptoms; others get diarrhea or become listless. Occasionally, pneumonia or eye inflammation occurs. Indoor cats in rodent-free homes may never be exposed. As many as 60 percent of humans also become exposed, usually after handling cat feces either in a litter box or garden, says Dr. Davidson. Chances are, most cat owners who have lived with felines for any length of time have already been exposed to toxoplasmosis. Like cats, people generally show no symptoms or appear to have only a mild "flu". Although a person shows no symptoms, he or she still produces an antibody, thus building up immunity.

"If you have been exposed to toxoplasmosis and produced an antibody, you're pretty well protected" says Dr. John Botti, director of maternal-fetal medicine at Penn State University College of Medicine. If a woman is exposed to the parasite for the first time during pregnancy, though, the effects that it will have on her and the baby depend on how far along she is in the pregnancy.

During the first three months, it is unlikely that a woman will pass the parasite on to her developing fetus. If toxoplasmosis is transmitted to the baby during this time, however, the chances are greatest that the baby will develop a major health problem. Conversely, a woman in her third trimester of pregnancy is most likely to pass on toxoplasmosis to her baby, but the parasite is least likely to cause serious birth defects.

Statistics show that of the 4 million babies born in the United States each year, only 1,200 suffer any effects from toxoplasmosis. Most of these babies have only mild problems, such as a rash or an eye infection. Nonetheless, the parasite can cause grave damage to a growing fetus. In rare instances, babies have developed hydrocephalus (a condition in which the brain swells), mental retardation and anemia.

To eliminate the risk of exposure to toxoplasmosis, pregnant cat owners should avoid handling the litter box by having someone else perform the task, or simply wear gloves when cleaning it, and washing hands thoroughly afterwards. This also applies to gardening, especially if outdoor cats frequent the area. "Just use common sense", Dr. Davidson advises. As an added precaution, he recommends that the litter box be changed daily because, once the organism is shed, it takes

at least 24 hours for it to become transmissible to humans. Interestingly, cats can only shed the organism in their feces one time during their lives – just after they have been exposed for the first time. And, Dr. Davidson says, “It’s unlikely they’ll shed it during a woman’s pregnancy.”

A simple blood test can determine if a person has ever been exposed to toxoplasmosis. Unfortunately, it cannot specify when exposure occurred, so it’s a good idea for a woman to be tested before becoming pregnant. If she has been exposed she will know for sure it was prior to her pregnancy.

Toxoplasmosis should be taken seriously, but it’s no reason for pregnant women to get rid or even avoid their cats. During pregnancy, a woman has days when she feels apprehensive about the future or stressed about her weight gain or fearful of the impending delivery. The perfect remedy – and one that is completely safe – may be to curl up on the sofa with a feline friend.