



Facts about Toxoplasmosis

What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasma gondii is a single-celled parasite that infects most warm-blooded animals, including people. The parasite rarely causes disease in healthy adults, but when it infects individuals with suppressed or immature immune systems, it can reproduce aggressively in the host's body tissues. The resulting disease is called toxoplasmosis.

What are the signs of toxoplasmosis?

The signs of toxoplasmosis vary depending on where in the cat's body the parasite is replicating, and whether the infection is new or long-standing. In newly infected animals, signs often include:

- Fever
- Lethargy
- Loss of appetite

In cat's whose immune systems don't bring the parasite under control, symptoms major symptoms will depend on which areas of the body are infected:

- Liver- yellowing of the skin, eyes, and mucus membranes
- Lungs- difficulty breathing, pneumonia
- Eyes- redness, pain, changes in iris color, cloudiness, vision loss (temporary or permanent,) abnormal pupil shape or size
- Nervous system- poor coordination, heightened sensitivity to touch, personality changes, circling, head pressing, ear twitching, difficulty eating, seizures, and incontinence

How is toxoplasma transmitted?

- Cats infected with toxoplasma for less than 2 weeks produce an immature form of the parasite called and "oocyst."
 - Oocysts exit the cat and enter the environment when the cat defecates.
 - After 24 hours outside of the cat's body, the oocysts become infectious to other animals who ingest them.
 - Oocysts survive in the environment for over a year.
 - People and other animals become infected with toxoplasmosis when they eat the oocysts or eat the products of animals who have eaten oocysts.
 - Cats are often infected by eating rodents but can also be infected by grooming themselves after sharing a litter box with an infected cat.
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- Agricultural animals are often infected by eating grass contaminated with oocysts.
- People are often infected when they eat undercooked meat, unpasteurized dairy, or unwashed fruits or vegetables, when they drink unclean water, or when they eat without first washing their hands.
- Infections in immunocompromised or pregnant people and animals can have serious health consequences, including death.

Is there a vaccine to prevent toxoplasmosis?

- No, there is no vaccine against toxoplasma gondii.

Treatment and Management

- Most cats do not require treatment and will show no signs of infection.
- The cornerstone of treatment for symptomatic cats is oral antibiotic therapy. In addition, topical or systemic steroids may be prescribed to calm inflammation in the eyes or nervous system.
- Treatment typically lasts at least 4 weeks but can take longer, particularly in cats with eye or nervous system signs. Cats with liver or lung signs may not recover from the illness, despite treatment.
- Preventing infections in cats requires feeding them well-cooked foods and restricting their access to rodents or other prey species.
- Preventing infections in people requires good food handling, cooking, and hygiene practices, including daily cleaning of any litter boxes in the home.
 - Complete avoidance of cats is NOT required for pregnant or immunosuppressed people.
 - More information on prevention of human infection is available on the CDC's website.

Adapted by Dr. Lisa Mekka from website publications from Cornell University
