

What is Toxoplasmosis? Information Leaflet

What Is Toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by a parasite called *Toxoplasma Gondii*.

This is a microscopic single cell organism that can be found in meat and cat faeces (poo). It is also found in the soil where cats defecate (where they go to poo), and unpasteurised goats' milk. The parasite can infect most birds and warm-blooded animals, including humans.

Cats are the only animals that can have infected faeces.

A cat can shed infectious faeces for about 14 days when it has been in contact with the parasite.

A healthy cat will not normally be a source of infection. You cannot become infected from stroking a cat, only by coming into contact with cat faeces.

How Could I Get It?

Toxoplasmosis can be caught by eating or having contact with anything infected or contaminated by the parasite. They include:

- Raw or undercooked meat, also including raw cured meat. e.g. Parma ham, salami
- Unwashed vegetables and fruit
- Cat faeces/ litter box
- Soil contamination with cat faeces
- Unpasteurised goats' milk and dairy products made from it e.g. cheese
- Soil or water that has been infected
- Working in the farming industry- Lambing is a particular risk to pregnant women
- Working in the garden without using gloves
- Working in catering without using gloves
- Working with animals

Person-to-person infection is not possible, except from mother to unborn baby. It is possible for transmission of the organism across the placenta if the mother becomes infected. Once you've been infected once, you will not catch it again.

How Can Toxoplasmosis Affect Me?

This infection doesn't always cause symptoms and in most cases you may not realise that you have had it.

In some people it can cause 'flu-like' symptoms or symptoms similar to glandular fever. Once you have had Toxoplasmosis you are generally thought to have life-long protection, unless you have problems with your immune system.

It can seriously affect an unborn baby, which is why we urge pregnant women to protect themselves and reduce the risk of becoming infected.

How Can Toxoplasmosis Affect My Baby?

Toxoplasmosis can be passed on to the unborn baby if the infection is caught for the first time in pregnancy or just prior to conception. This is called Congenital Toxoplasmosis.

The risk to the developing baby depends on when in the pregnancy the infection was acquired. If you catch it earlier on in your pregnancy, the effects can be more severe than catching it later on. If you catch Toxoplasmosis in pregnancy, it does not mean that the baby will be infected. Around 4 out of 10 babies of affected pregnant mums may also become infected.

Although rare, Toxoplasmosis caught in pregnancy can cause the following problems with an unborn baby:

- Miscarriage
- Stillbirth
- Learning difficulties as a result of damage to the baby's brain
- Problems with the eyes and hearing
- Infection of the eyes
- Enlarged liver & spleen
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin)
- Pneumonia

It's thought that somewhere between 1 in 10,000 to 30,000 babies are affected by Congenital Toxoplasmosis. Most babies will have minor symptoms, or symptoms which do not become apparent until the baby grows up.

How Can I Protect Myself And My Unborn Baby?

You can reduce your risk of infection by following the advice below:

- Avoid raw, undercooked and cured meats
- Wear protective clothing such as gloves and a face shield if you work in high risk industries such as farming (in particular lambing), catering, gardening or working on the land or with animals.
- Wear gloves when gardening at home
- Avoid cleaning cat litter trays (ask a family member to do this instead), or at least wear gloves
- Wash your hands before & after handling food, touching animals or doing any of the above
- Clean food preparation surfaces and kitchen utensils thoroughly
- Wash all fruit and veg including pre-prepared salads
- Avoid unpasteurised dairy products (including products made from goats milk)

The NHS does not routinely screen pregnant women for Toxoplasmosis as it is rare. However, if you feel you may have come into contact with it, ask your midwife or doctor about having a blood test. The infection may not show in your test results until 3 weeks after you became infected.

Treatment is in antibiotic form, however this may only help reduce the effects of transmission to the baby.

Scans and other tests can help determine any damage that may have resulted from Toxoplasmosis infection.

If in doubt, always ask your midwife or doctor.

This leaflet can be made available in difference formats on request. If you would like to make any suggestions or comments about the content of this leaflet, then please contact the Patient Experience Team on 0151 702 4353 or by email at pals@lwh.nhs.uk

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Ref: Mat_2018-125
Issue Date: May 2018
Review Date: May 2021