



ALLEY CAT RESCUE

AN ALLIANCE FOR CAT PROTECTION

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Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasma gondii is an intestinal parasite that causes the disease toxoplasmosis. This disease is most often associated with cats, however, raw meat (especially pork) is the primary mode of transmission of the parasite to humans. Consuming raw or undercooked meat is a danger, as is failing to wash your hands properly after handling meat or utensils used with contaminated meat. *Toxoplasma gondii* cannot pass through the skin, but oocytes left on the skin can unintentionally be ingested if hands are not washed properly, resulting in infection (CDC, “Toxoplasmosis,” accessed 2014). Toxoplasmosis is of particular concern for pregnant women and those with compromised immune systems. Despite the low risk of transmission of the disease via cats, anti-cat campaigns use this disease to spread unnecessary fear and uninformed doctors continue to persuade pregnant women to get rid of their beloved cats.

This parasite is estimated to infect as much as one third of the world’s human population, but very rarely do those infected get sick (Montoya and Liesenfeld, 2004). Most healthy people have immune systems that can fight off the parasite and will never become sick. However, the parasite can be dangerous in rare cases. Individuals with weakened immune systems, such as AIDS patients, can sometimes become seriously ill as a result of infection, and pregnant women can pass on the parasite to their unborn child. For this reason, doctors are quick to tell pregnant women to get rid of their cats. However, it is important to note that there is less risk of acquiring toxoplasmosis from cats than eating raw vegetables and undercooked meat (Vittecoq et al., 2012). Additionally, owning a cat does not increase the risk of contracting toxoplasmosis (Vittecoq et al., 2012).

Still, pregnant women can take certain precautions when in contact with cats to be safe. If pregnant, one should avoid cleaning litter boxes if possible. Infected cats could pass the oocyst of *Toxoplasma* in feces. If a pregnant woman has no alternative but to clean the litter box herself, she should wear disposable gloves and wash her hands thoroughly afterwards. The same applies if she is gardening, as it is possible for the parasite to live in soil (CDC, “Toxoplasmosis,” accessed 2014).

Pregnant women should also keep their cat indoors, where the cat is not exposed to other animals who may be infected, and all newly adopted cats should be tested for the disease. Pregnant women can also be screened for toxoplasmosis. The only risk occurs when the parasite infects a woman during pregnancy—if she was exposed to toxoplasmosis before pregnancy, there is no risk to her child since she will have developed antibodies to fight the parasite. However, some experts

recommend waiting six months after an infection before trying to become pregnant (CDC, "Toxoplasmosis," accessed 2014). If a woman is pregnant when she contracts toxoplasmosis, medication is available.

Web MD reports:

It is important to understand the mode of transmission from cats to understand how minimal the risk is. Even a cat with an active toxoplasmosis infection is only capable of passing it on for seven to ten days of her entire life, when there's an acute infection. It takes anywhere from one to three days for oocysts shed in the feces to become infectious—which means the litter box would have to sit unscooped for one to three days before the infection could be passed on. Then, to become infected from cat feces, a person would have to touch the feces and then touch an opening in their body. (WebMD, accessed 2014)

ACR does not want to make light of the fact that if a pregnant woman does contract toxoplasmosis it can be dangerous for her unborn baby. However, those who do not like cats exaggerate this particular hazard. Many doctors are uninformed that the risk of toxoplasmosis for pregnant women is low and exposure from cat feces is far less likely than from raw and undercooked meat.

References

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