



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Toxoplasmosis

What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by a single celled protozoan organism, *Toxoplasma gondii*. Cats are the definitive host of toxoplasma and are required for the organism to complete its life cycle. Toxoplasma eggs or oocysts are shed in cat feces and can survive in the environment for a prolonged period of time. Animals ingest the oocysts and the organism becomes encysted in the animal's tissues. Toxoplasma is found worldwide and can cause infection in many animals, birds and humans.

How do you get it?

People can develop toxoplasmosis by:

- Ingesting toxoplasma oocysts from contaminated vegetables
- Eating undercooked meat.
- Drinking unpasteurized dairy contaminated with infective tachyzoites.
- Direct contact with infected cat feces or a contaminated environment.
- Ingesting infective oocysts from dirt in sandboxes, playgrounds and yards, in which cats have defecated.

What are the symptoms of toxoplasmosis?

People with normal immune systems rarely develop signs of illness. Immunocompromised people such as cancer or AIDS patients, children or pregnant women can develop more severe disease. Early signs are often mild flu-like with fever, headache, body aches, and sore throat. More severe disease occurs if the organism enters the muscles, nervous system, heart or eyes. Toxoplasmosis can cause birth defects or abortion in pregnant women and neurological infection and death in AIDS patients.

When do symptoms start?

Symptoms of toxoplasmosis can occur from 5 to 23 days after exposure to the organism.

What is the treatment for toxoplasmosis?

Usually healthy people do not require treatment for toxoplasmosis. Physicians may prescribe antibiotics or other medications for immunocompromised or pregnant patients.

How can you keep from getting it?

- Thoroughly cook all to safe temperatures using a food thermometer
 - Meats (excluding poultry) 145° F (63° C)
 - Ground Meat (excluding poultry) 160° F (71° C)
 - All Poultry 165° F (74° C)OR
 - Freezing meat to -4° F (-20° C) for 3 days is a good alternative.
- Carefully wash vegetables and fruits before eating.
- Wear gloves when gardening or working in areas that may be contaminated with cat feces and wash hands thoroughly afterwards.
- Wash hands after handling raw meat, gardening, contact with animals and before eating.
- Feed cats prepared or cooked foods and discourage hunting.
- Keep cats inside when possible to prevent exposure to toxoplasmosis from eating birds and rodents that may be infected with toxoplasma.
- Keep cats indoors to reduce shedding of oocysts in the environment.
- Cat litter boxes should be changed daily. Dispose dried litter without shaking to avoid aerial dispersal of oocysts. Wash hands thoroughly after cleaning.
- Pregnant women or immunocompromised individuals should not clean cat litter boxes if possible. If no one else can perform the task, wear disposable gloves and wash hands with soap and water afterwards.

For more information, see:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):
<https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/toxoplasmosis/index.html>

Toxoplasma Infection in Pregnant Women (CDC):
https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/toxoplasmosis/gen_info/pr_egnant.html

Center for Food Security and Public Health Fast Facts on Toxoplasmosis
https://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/FastFacts/pdfs/toxoplasmosis_F.pdf