

# TOXOPLASMOSIS

Toxoplasmosis is caused by a parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*. Very few people infected with the *Toxoplasma* parasite have symptoms because a healthy person's immune system usually keeps the parasite from causing illness. However, pregnant women and individuals who have compromised immune systems should be cautious; for them, a *Toxoplasma* infection could cause serious health problems.

In animal facilities, *Toxoplasma* infection occurs when a person accidentally swallows cat feces from a random-source, *Toxoplasma*-infected cat that is shedding the organism in its feces. This might happen if you were to accidentally touch your hands to your mouth after cleaning a cat's litter box or touching anything that has come into contact with cat feces. For about 2 weeks after infection with *Toxoplasma*, cats pass millions of parasites in their stool every day. The parasites mature and can infect people for 2 to 5 days after they are passed in a cat's stool. No treatment can prevent cats from being infected or from passing the parasite. Cats become infected by eating infected prey (e.g., a mouse) or undercooked meat (e.g., pork) infected with the parasite.

Symptoms of the infection vary.

- Most people who become infected with *Toxoplasma* are not aware of it.
- Some people who have toxoplasmosis may feel as if they have the "flu" with swollen lymph glands or muscle aches and pains that last for a month or more.
- Severe toxoplasmosis, causing damage to the brain, eyes, or other organs, can develop from an acute *Toxoplasma* infection or one that had occurred earlier in life and is now reactivated. Severe cases are more likely in individuals who have weak immune systems.
- Most infants who are infected while still in the womb have no symptoms at birth, but they may develop symptoms later in life. A small percentage of infected newborns have serious eye or brain damage at birth.

People who are most likely to develop severe toxoplasmosis include:

- Infants born to mothers who became infected with *Toxoplasma* for the first time during or just before pregnancy.
- Persons with severely weakened immune systems, such as individuals with HIV/AIDS, those taking certain types of chemotherapy, and those who have recently received an organ transplant.

General sanitation steps can be taken to reduce the chances of becoming infected with *Toxoplasma*. These include daily cleaning of cat litterboxes, wearing gloves when cleaning litterboxes, and then washing hands well with soap and warm water afterwards.

The risk of transmitting *Toxoplasma* infection is very low for purpose-bred cats and/or random-source cats housed in a rodent-proof facility for a month or more and fed only commercial cat food.