



BEHAVIOR
SERIES

Your Pregnancy and Your Cat

DON'T FALL PREY TO MYTH AND MISINFORMATION!
Being pregnant doesn't mean you have to give up caring for your cat. Learn the real scoop on pregnancy, cat litter boxes, and toxoplasmosis—and the simple steps you can take to reduce the risk.

And Baby Makes Three

Congratulations, you're expecting a baby! You've probably heard of toxoplasmosis because it can cause serious birth defects. A woman who acquires toxoplasmosis during pregnancy can transmit the infection to her unborn child. It is this infection in utero which causes fear among cat owners as congenital toxoplasmosis infection can lead to miscarriage or an array of malformations at birth. Many pregnant women will try to lower their risk of acquiring toxoplasmosis by abandoning their cats.

However, toxoplasmosis is a rare disease in countries like ours and is one that can easily be avoided. Cats acquire toxoplasmosis from eating contaminated raw meat, birds, mice, or soil. While cats are the only species of animal to shed the infectious stage in their feces, other animals can disseminate toxoplasmosis if their infected meat is eaten without proper cooking.

Fortunately, cat ownership does not necessarily increase the risk of acquiring toxoplasmosis. An understanding of the life cycle of *Toxoplasma gondii* (*T. gondii*) and the role that cats play in disease transmission can allay fears of transmitting congenital toxoplasmosis. Cats should continue to be sources of joy and companionship to their owners during pregnancy and following the birth of a child.

Life Cycle

T. gondii is a protozoan organism that can infect all mammals, who serve as an intermediate host. The cat is the only animal who can support both sexual and asexual reproduction of *T. gondii*, and thus plays a crucial role in the organism's life cycle.

T. gondii exists primarily in three forms. Oocysts develop as a result of sexual reproduction, which occurs in the small intestine of a cat who has consumed tissue cysts containing *T. gondii*. These infectious oocysts are produced for approximately two weeks after a cat first acquires the infection, which usually occurs in a kitten who hunts outdoors. Once a cat has been infected with toxoplasmosis, she acquires immunity and only rarely can be reinfected. Therefore, only during her first exposure to *T. gondii* does a cat excrete potentially infectious oocysts. In addition, oocysts are not immediately infective and require an incubation period of one to five days to become infective.

Humans acquire toxoplasmosis by one of three mechanisms. Most commonly, undercooked meat which contains *T. gondii* within tissue cysts is consumed. Direct ingestion of infective oocysts is a less common method of acquisition and is unlikely to occur from

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