The Cat Can Stay: Debunking Pregnancy Myths about Toxoplasmosis

By Robert Felix, MotherToBaby Past President

I'll never forget the panic in her voice. "The web said, 'stay away from cats when you're pregnant because your baby can be mentally retarded!" It was the first thing this soon-to-be mom could get out the second I picked up the phone. "It is true? I got rid of my cat immediately because I was so worried and I feel terrible about it," she breathlessly explained. As a teratogen information specialist (someone trained to answer questions about exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding), I knew her concern was shared by many. She was worried about something called "toxoplasmosis," and after calling her doctor's office, a nurse she spoke with didn't say much or educate her about the infection. The nurse just reaffirmed that by getting rid of her cat, she had done "the right thing." She was beyond frustrated. Not to mention, she missed her family's feline!

After hearing her frustration, I asked her some basic questions relative to the cat.
• How long has she had the cat?
• Was the cat only indoor, outdoor, or both?
• Did she feed the cat any raw meat?
• Who changed the cat litter?
• Did she do any gardening?

Based on what she described, there was nothing to indicate that she was at an increased risk. "But I'm sure I've harmed my baby," she said anxiously. So, I broke down the basics about toxoplasmosis. January is Birth Defects Prevention Month, what better time to revisit facts about infection?

Toxoplasmosis infections can occur by eating undercooked, infected meat, or handling soil or cat feces that contain the parasite. Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by the parasite Toxoplasma gondii. Although most adults have no symptoms, swelling of the lymph nodes, fever, headache or muscle pain may be seen. In most cases, once a person gets toxoplasmosis, he/she cannot get it again. About 85% of pregnant women in the United States are at risk for toxoplasmosis infection.

Women who have recently gotten a cat or have outdoor cats, eat undercooked meat, garden, or who have had a recent mononucleosis-type illness are at increased risk. In Europe where far more undercooked meat is eaten, there is a higher prevalence of toxoplasmosis. Toxoplasma gondii can be found in raw or undercooked meat, raw eggs and unpasteurized milk. Cats that eat raw meat or rodents can become infected, and the parasite lives in the cat's feces for two weeks. Toxoplasma gondii eggs can live in cat feces buried in soil up to 18 months.

To avoid infection:
• Cook meat until it is no longer pink and the juices run clear.
• Wear gloves while gardening.
• Wash all fruits and vegetables.
• Wash hands carefully after handling raw meat fruit, vegetables, and soil.
• As for furry friends… Pregnancy's not the time to be on litter box duty, but is a good time to get your partner to do it for you!
• Also, don't feed cats raw meat.

Taking simple precautions to avoid infection during pregnancy will keep you healthy and keep kitty from landing in a homeless shelter. In addition, it's very important for women to get prenatal care, talk to their healthcare providers, eat healthy and take their prenatal vitamins (including folic acid) during pregnancy. Remember, #Prevent 2Protect.



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MotherToBaby is a service of OTIS, a suggested resource by many agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have questions about toxoplasmosis, please visit our toxoplasmosis fact sheet, call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847 or try out MotherToBaby's new text information service by texting questions to (855) 999-3525. You can also visit MotherToBaby.org to browse a library of fact sheets about dozens of viruses, medications, vaccines, alcohol, diseases, or other exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

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