

Toxoplasmosis

This sheet talks about exposure to or having toxoplasmosis in a pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. You can get it by eating infected meat that hasn't been cooked properly, drinking water that is contaminated, or handling soil or cat feces that contain the parasite.

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. Once infected, the cat can shed the parasite in the feces for up to two weeks. *Toxoplasma gondii* eggs can live in cat feces or buried in soil for up to 18 months.

Around 65% to 85% of people who are pregnant in the United States have a chance of getting toxoplasmosis. People who have recently gotten a cat or have outdoor cats, eat undercooked meat, garden, or who have had a recent mononucleosis-type illness have an increased chance of getting toxoplasmosis.

Most adults have no symptoms if infected. Some people might have swelling of the lymph nodes, fever, headache or muscle pain (flu-like symptoms). In most cases, once you have gotten toxoplasmosis, you cannot get it again. But there have been reports of people who have gotten infected more than one time.

What can I do to reduce the chance of a toxoplasmosis infection?

To avoid infection, people who are pregnant should:

- Cook meat until it is no longer pink and the juices run clear. A food thermometer should be used to measure the internal temperature to make sure the meat is cooked all the way through.
- Wash cutting boards, dishes, counters, and utensils with hot soapy water after any contact with raw meat, seafood, or unwashed fruits or vegetables.
- Wash hands carefully after handling raw meat, fruit, vegetables, and soil.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables. Peeling fruits and vegetables also helps to reduce the chance of exposure.
- Do not touch cat feces directly; wear gloves if changing cat litter & immediately wash hands.
- Do not feed cats raw meat.

How can I find out if I am infected with toxoplasmosis?

A blood test can tell if someone has ever had toxoplasmosis. When possible, testing for toxoplasmosis should be done before getting pregnant. If an infection is found during pregnancy, more than one test may be needed to see whether the infection is recent or old. Talk with your healthcare provider about your concerns and testing options.

How can I find out if my baby has been infected with toxoplasmosis during my pregnancy?

If you have recently been infected, the fluid around the baby (amniotic fluid) or fetal blood can be tested. These tests cannot tell you how serious the infection is. About one out of three babies with congenital toxoplasmosis will have a problem that can be seen on ultrasound. After birth, a blood test can be done on the baby to see if they are infected.

Is there any treatment for toxoplasmosis during pregnancy?

Finding the infection early and treating it as soon as possible can lower the chance that the baby will become infected. Your healthcare provider can discuss specific treatment options with you.

I have toxoplasmosis. Can it make it harder for me to become pregnant?

An increased chance of fertility problems has been reported in people who have had a previous toxoplasmosis

infection.

Does having/getting toxoplasmosis increase the chance for miscarriage?

Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. An increased chance for miscarriage has been reported with active toxoplasmosis infection during pregnancy.

I had toxoplasmosis in the past, can that increase the chance of birth defects or other pregnancy complications?

Infection of the developing baby only occurs when the person who is pregnant has an active infection during pregnancy. In general, there is no increased chance to the baby when toxoplasmosis occurs more than 6 months before conception. If you had toxoplasmosis in the past, you are likely immune, which means there would not be an increased chance for pregnancy complications. People with a weakened immune system could develop another active infection. In addition, some people who were pregnant got a new infection during pregnancy.

Does having/getting toxoplasmosis during pregnancy increase the chance of birth defects?

Every pregnancy starts with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. The toxoplasmosis parasite is known to cross the placenta. In about 1 in 5 (20%) cases of toxoplasmosis in pregnancy, the baby is also infected. Babies who become infected during pregnancy have “congenital toxoplasmosis” infection. In the United States, between 400 and 4000 babies are born with toxoplasmosis each year. Some infants with congenital toxoplasmosis can have problems with the brain, eyes, heart, kidneys, blood, liver, or spleen. When the infection starts during the first trimester, the baby has a higher chance for severe problems. However, the chance that the baby will be infected is about 10-15%.

Does having/getting toxoplasmosis during pregnancy cause pregnancy complications?

When the mother is infected late in pregnancy, the chance that the baby will have severe problems is lower. However, the chance of passing the infection to the baby is higher later in pregnancy, 32% up to 87% in the third trimester. An increased chance for stillbirth has been reported in women with active toxoplasmosis infection during pregnancy.

Does having/getting toxoplasmosis in pregnancy cause long-term problems?

Infants with congenital toxoplasmosis usually don't look sick at birth. Long-term studies show that up to 90% can develop problems over time, such as: vision loss, seizures, hearing loss, microcephaly (very small head and brain), hydrocephalus (too much fluid in the brain), or developmental delays. These symptoms can occur months or years after birth. Infants with congenital toxoplasmosis should be treated for the infection during the first year of life and then should be checked every so often for problems. Your healthcare team can discuss the appropriate treatments.

Can I breastfeed while I have toxoplasmosis?

Since most people with a history of toxoplasmosis will build immunity to the parasite, it is unlikely that toxoplasmosis will be passed through breast milk. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that people who are breastfeeding with active infection continue to breastfeed unless they have broken skin or bleeding in the nipple area. If you suspect that the baby has a fever for flu-like symptoms, contact the child's healthcare provider. Talk to your healthcare provider about your breastfeeding questions.

I have toxoplasmosis. Can it make it harder for me to get my partner pregnant or increase the chance of birth defects?

Some studies suggest that toxoplasmosis can be passed to a partner during unprotected sex, including oral. For general information on paternal exposures, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/>.

Please click here for references.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at [MotherToBaby.org](https://www.MotherToBaby.org).

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