

Is it safe to be around my cat when pregnant?

We're often asked if it is safe to care for- or even be around- a pet cat during pregnancy. Many women are aware that cats can carry and transmit a disease called Toxoplasmosis. This is a parasitic infection for which cats are the only true host, however humans can become infected. While a benign disease in adults, in pregnancy it can be transmitted to the baby and it is known to cause a number of developmental problems. Without getting into particular disease details, let's focus on several related questions. What are the chances my cat is infected? Are there other ways to become infected? Is routine screening during pregnancy advised? What measure should be taken to decrease risk?

Cats acquire the infection from eating other animals, primarily rodents, already infected with the parasite. Outdoor cats are therefore at the greatest risk. After initial infection, they only shed the parasite, meaning they are only infectious, for about two weeks. Therefore, older cats or cats that spend much of their time outdoors may have already shed the parasite and are less likely to pose a risk. Indoor cats too may become infected if fed raw meat. If a cat is strictly confined to the home and fed carefully then there is really no risk at all. Infection is spread via the fecal-oral route. That is, the parasite is excreted in the cat's feces and can only be contracted by oral ingestion. It's tough to do, but possible.

So, your pet cat should be perceived as very low risk to you during pregnancy. Indeed the greatest risk of acquiring the disease is not from your cat but from ingestion of poorly cooked meat. This is thought to account for at least 50% of neonatal infections. The other way infection can occur is through working the soil. The parasite may be present in the dirt (from cat feces) and inadvertent infection may occur (again, fecal-oral route). This is probably how other animals acquire the infection as well.

Because the incidence of congenital toxoplasmosis in this country is so low, routine maternal testing is not advised. Testing is by measuring maternal antibodies to Toxoplasmosis. A key problem is the acute phase antibodies (i.e., the IgM antibodies that generally indicate recent infection and therefore give a possible risk for the baby) can persist for months or even years after the infection occurred. The presence therefore does not accurately indicate a recent infection or risk to the baby and can cause needless worry. Also, several recent studies from Europe (where the disease is much more common) did not show any clear evidence that treating mothers known to have been infected during pregnancy decreased the risk of infection in the baby.

The following steps are advised to minimize risk during pregnancy:

- Cook meat to a safe temperate (160°F).
- Wash all fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Carefully clean all utensils and surfaces exposed to raw meat.
- Avoid changing the cat litter yourself. If this can't be avoided, use rubber gloves and wash your hands afterwards.
- Avoid feeding your cat raw or undercooked meat.
- Consider keeping an outdoor cat confined indoors throughout your pregnancy in order to avoid new infection.
- Wear gloves when working in soil and wash hands afterwards.