



Toxoplasmosis

What is Toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by the parasite *Toxoplasmosis gondii*. It is a single cell organism, invisible to the human eye. It can be found in meat, cat faeces, and in soil where cats defecate. It can be caught from eating raw or undercooked meat, from unpasteurised goat's milk or unpasteurised goat's milk products, from unwashed, uncooked fruit and vegetables, from dirty cat litter, or from soil contaminated with cat faeces. It can also be caught when handling a lambing ewe, the afterbirth, or a newly-born lamb (sheep become infected when they eat feed or bedding material contaminated by infected cat faeces).

Once someone has had an infection with Toxoplasmosis they become immune to future infections.

Effects of Toxoplasmosis on humans

People who become infected may experience mild flu-like symptoms, prolonged glandular-fever type illness, or may have no symptoms at all. Toxoplasmosis is not usually dangerous to the healthy adult or child. It is only dangerous to humans if the immune system is not healthy, as in people with HIV and AIDA or those on immuno-suppressant drugs.

Where the immune system is unable to restrict the spread of the parasite, the effects as described below may result.

Effects of Toxoplasmosis on the unborn child

If a women becomes infected with Toxoplasmosis during pregnancy, there is a substantial risk that her baby will become infected.

The severity of the effects on the baby depend on the stage in the pregnancy at which the disease was caught.

If the infection occurs early in the pregnancy, the baby may be miscarried or stillborn. If infected between the third and sixth month of pregnancy, the baby may develop some or all of the following severe symptoms: -

- Hydrocephalus (an excess of fluid on the brain)
- Brain lesions (scarring of the brain tissue)
- Eye damage (retinochoroditis)

Hydrocephalus and brain lesions can cause mental retardation and epilepsy while retinochoroditis causes partial sight or may cause blindness.

The symptoms, particularly retinochoroditis, may sometimes develop at any stage of childhood or adulthood.

Precautions for pregnant women and other “at risk” groups

- Ensure that meat eaten is thoroughly cooked right through so that it has no traces of blood or pinkness.
- After preparing raw meat, wash hands, cooking utensils and work surfaces.
- Avoid unpasteurised goat’s milk or unpasteurised goat’s milk products.
- Wash fruit and vegetables before eating.
- If handling dirty cat litter, wear rubber gloves and always wash hands and gloves afterwards (avoid this task if possible).
- Always wear gloves when gardening and wash hands afterwards.
- Cover children’s outdoor sandboxes to prevent cats from using them as litter boxes.
- Avoid contact with sheep at lambing time.

Detection of Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasmosis can be especially difficult to detect in pregnant women as the symptoms can easily be confused with the general fatigue associated with pregnancy. Symptoms include swollen glands, fatigue, headache, sore throat, aching muscles and sometimes fever. In some cases, no symptoms will show.

Testing for Toxoplasmosis

If you are planning to have a baby or you think you may have been infected by Toxoplasmosis then a blood test is available which can check on whether:

- You have already had the infection and are therefore immune.
- You have never had an infection and so must take the precautions listed earlier.
- You are infected and therefore need further tests, advice and treatment. This test is available from your local general practitioner (GP) or ante-natal clinic.

If you are infected with Toxoplasmosis early in pregnancy, treatment with antibiotics will reduce the risk of the infection being transmitted to your baby by 60% - 70%. If the baby has been infected, antibiotics can be used to treat the baby in the womb.

Further Help and Advice

If you are still worried about Toxoplasmosis contact your local GP or ante-natal clinic.

Additional Information is available from:
The Irish Toxoplasmosis Association
19 St. Mary's Crescent, Westport, Co. Mayo.
Tel: (098) 27752