

ORCHARD HILLS VETERINARY HOSPITAL

TOXOPLASMOSIS (Toxo)

What is it?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection due to a parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*. It is a small one celled organism which can be found in many species of animal. It is estimated that approximately 50% of cats have been exposed to the parasite and therefore, infected cats are a cause of concern in humans. Transferred to humans through faeces it can affect many different parts of the body, but the most common form is that of mild flu-type symptoms and in some cases pneumonia.

What about pregnant women?

If a pregnant woman contracts toxoplasmosis, it may affect the unborn baby result in lifetime problems for the baby. However, the occurrence of toxoplasmosis in newborn babies is approximately 0.02%. If the mother has previously contracted the parasite, she will generally pass on immunity to the foetus via the placenta.

What about adults and cats?

If a person or a cat is exposed to the disease, (not necessarily infected) the animal or person will develop antibodies. It is estimated that approx 50% of cats have been exposed and have antibodies.

How is toxoplasmosis transmitted?

The organism must complete the life cycle in the cat. Cats are capable of transmitting the disease to humans but for this to occur the following must happen: -

1. The cat must eat something that is infected – most commonly MICE, or UNDERCOOKED MEAT. (usually pork or mutton)
2. The cat must be shedding the organism in **their faeces**, which only occurs **once** in a lifetime for about a 10-day period.
3. The Toxo organism must 'incubate' in the cat's faeces for approximately 2 – 5 days before it is infective to humans. This may occur in a litter box or in the soil.
4. The Toxo organism **must** be swallowed by the person being infected. There is no aerosol spreading of the disease.

Note: The Toxo organism may also be transmitted to humans via ingestion of undercooked meats, particularly pork or mutton.

Can cats be tested for toxo?

Both the pregnant woman and the cat can be screened for Toxo antibodies (a blood test).

- (a) A negative result means that the woman (or cat) has not been exposed and therefore **has no immunity** to the disease. Both are therefore susceptible to infection.

(b) A positive test means that (1) there has been exposure in the past or (2) an active infection is present. The only way to differentiate between the two is to do a second test 2 – 4 weeks later. If the result is significantly higher, then active infection is present.

Therefore, **do not panic** if a positive test occurs – There is a very good chance that you or your cat are immune to the disease.

How can toxo b prevented?

- Try to avoid giving your cat poorly cooked meat, or allowing it to eat MICE.
- Clean out litter boxes daily. To be extra cautious, pregnant women should wear gloves.
- Wear gloves when gardening in the soil.
- Avoid eating poorly cooked meat.
- Keep children's sand boxes covered.

REMEMBER this disease is very rarely a troublemaker, and simple precautions can all but eliminate any risk of contamination.

Please call or come in to have a chat with our Veterinarian Dr Camille Brandt if you have any further questions