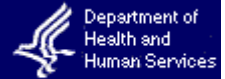




# U.S. Food and Drug Administration



## CENTER FOR FOOD SAFETY AND APPLIED NUTRITION

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**CFSAN/Office of Food Safety, Defense, and Outreach**  
**August 24, 2005**

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**Food Safety**  
*for*  
**Moms-to-Be**

Protecting yourself and your unborn baby just takes following these careful food selection and preparation tips.

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### Before You're Pregnant

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At-A-Glance

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### **Toxoplasma: Prevention Before You Become Pregnant**

**Did you know that you could feel healthy, but still have toxoplasmosis? This foodborne illness is caused by the parasite, *Toxoplasma gondii*, and it could be harmful to you and your baby if you become pregnant. Here are some answers to frequently asked questions about toxoplasmosis.**

### **"What is Toxoplasma gondii?"**

It's a parasite found in raw and undercooked meat; unwashed fruits and vegetables; water; dust; soil; dirty cat-litter boxes; and outdoor places where cat feces can be found. It can cause an illness called toxoplasmosis, which can be particularly harmful to you and your baby.

### **"I'm not pregnant - so why should I be concerned about toxoplasmosis?"**

If you have a cat and are thinking about becoming pregnant, you may be at risk for toxoplasmosis. *T. gondii* infects essentially all cats that spend any time outdoors. Cats get this parasite by eating small animals or raw meat that's infected. The parasite is then passed on through the cat's feces. It doesn't make the cat sick, so you may not know if your cat has the parasite.

***If you become pregnant while the *T. gondii* parasite is still in your blood, it can pass through the placenta to your unborn child.***

You can become exposed to *T. gondii* by accidental ingestion of contaminated cat feces, which can occur if you touch your hands to your mouth after gardening, cleaning a litter box, or touching anything that comes in contact with cat feces. Over time, the parasite can enter your blood stream. It usually takes about a week. If you become pregnant while the parasite is still in your blood, it can pass through the placenta to your unborn child. You can also get toxoplasmosis by eating raw or undercooked meat or drinking water contaminated with *T. gondii*. So, you should eat thoroughly cooked meat.

See the [Apply the Heat \(PDF\)](#) | 20.3KB - also available as [JPG](#) | 44.4KB for the recommended cooking temperatures for meat.

### **"How would I know if I have toxoplasmosis?"**

Toxoplasmosis can be difficult to detect. However, symptoms typically include: swollen glands, fever, headache, muscle pain, or a stiff neck. Only 10% of women infected with the parasite have noticeable symptoms - so you could have toxoplasmosis without even being aware that you're ill. If you do experience any of the above symptoms, see your doctor or health-care provider immediately.

**Fact:** About **85%** of pregnant women in the U.S. are at risk of being infected with toxoplasmosis. (*American Journal of Epidemiology*)

### **"How could toxoplasmosis affect my baby?"**

In babies, *T. gondii* can cause hearing loss, mental retardation, and blindness. Some children can develop brain or eye problems years after birth. Children born infected with *T. gondii* can also require years of special care, including special education and ophthalmology visits. *Early identification and treatment of children infected with T. gondii is essential in order to minimize the parasite's effects.*

### **Facts:**

- It's estimated that toxoplasmosis infects between **400** and **4,000** fetuses in the U.S. each year. (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*)
- Some experts estimate that Toxoplasma kills as many as **80** infants in the U.S. each year. (*U.S. Department of Agriculture*)

### **"If I've had toxoplasmosis, how long should I wait before I**

***become pregnant?"***

Some experts suggest waiting for six months after infection to become pregnant. Women who become infected can be treated with medications to clear up the infection.

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***"How can I prevent toxoplasmosis?"***

**If you have a cat, you should:**

- Have someone else change the litter box, if possible. If you have to clean it, wear disposable gloves and wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water afterwards.
- Change the litter box daily. The parasite doesn't become infectious until one to five days after it's shed in the feces.
- Wear gloves when gardening in a garden or handling sand from a sandbox **because cats may have excreted feces in them**. Be sure to wash your hands with soap and warm water afterwards.
- Cover outdoor sandboxes to **prevent cats from using them as litter boxes**.
- Feed your cat commercial dry or canned food. *Never* feed your cat raw meat because it can be a source of the *T. gondii* parasite.
- Keep indoor cats indoors. Be especially cautious if you bring outdoor cats indoors.
- Avoid stray cats, especially kittens.
- Don't get a new cat while you're pregnant.

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***"If I own a cat that goes outside, should I be tested?"***

Yes, to be safe. Also, see your doctor or health-care provider if you have questions about toxoplasmosis.

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**Note:** See your doctor or health-care provider if you have questions about toxoplasmosis.

For more information on how to prevent toxoplasmosis, see [Toxoplasma](#).

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For information about food safety, call FDA's toll-free information line at:  
**1-888-SAFE-FOOD.**

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[Food Safety for Moms-to-Be](#)

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