

# Toxoplasma from Food Safety for Moms to Be



[While You're Pregnant Main Page \(/food/people-risk-foodborne-illness/while-youre-pregnant-tips-food-safety-moms-be\)](/food/people-risk-foodborne-illness/while-youre-pregnant-tips-food-safety-moms-be)

[What Is Foodborne Illness? \(/food/people-risk-foodborne-illness/what-foodborne-illness-food-safety-moms-be\)](/food/people-risk-foodborne-illness/what-foodborne-illness-food-safety-moms-be) | [Listeria \(/food/people-risk-foodborne-illness/listeria-food-safety-moms-be\)](/food/people-risk-foodborne-illness/listeria-food-safety-moms-be) | Toxoplasma

[En Español \(Spanish\) \(/food/people-risk-foodborne-illness/toxoplasma-de-seguridad-alimentaria-para-futuras-mamas\)](/food/people-risk-foodborne-illness/toxoplasma-de-seguridad-alimentaria-para-futuras-mamas)

## Toxoplasma: Frequently Asked Questions

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

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

### ***"How could I get toxoplasmosis?"***

You could get this illness by...

- Eating raw or undercooked meat, especially pork, lamb, or venison, or by touching your hands to your mouth after handling undercooked meat. See the [Apply the Heat \(/food/people-risk-foodborne-illness/heat-chart-food-safety-moms-be\)](/food/people-risk-foodborne-illness/heat-chart-food-safety-moms-be) (PDF [\(/media/74326/download\)](/media/74326/download) | 20.3KB) chart for the recommended cooking temperatures for meats.
- Using contaminated knives, utensils, cutting boards, and other foods that have had contact with raw meat.
- Drinking water contaminated with *T. gondii*.

- Accidentally ingesting 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.

### **Facts:**

- About **85%** of pregnant women in the U.S. are at risk of being infected with toxoplasmosis. (American Journal of Epidemiology)
- About 50% of toxoplasmosis infections in the U.S. each year are acquired from food. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

### **"How could toxoplasmosis affect me?"**

*Symptoms typically include: swollen glands, fever, headache, muscle pain, or a stiff neck.*

*Toxoplasmosis can be difficult to detect. Some women infected with the parasite may not have noticeable symptoms - so a pregnant woman can easily expose her fetus to toxoplasmosis without even being aware that she's ill. That's why prevention of toxoplasmosis is very important. If you do experience any of the above symptoms, see your doctor or healthcare provider immediately.*

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

*In babies, *T. gondii* can cause hearing loss, intellectual disability, 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 care. 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 **300** and **4,000** fetuses in the U.S. each year. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- By age 20, as many as **80%** of children born with toxoplasmosis that was left untreated develop impairments ranging from mental retardation to blindness. (Council for Agricultural Science and Technology)

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

*It's easy - you and your family should:*

### **CLEAN**

- *Wash your hands with soap and warm water after touching soil, sand, raw meat, cat litter, or unwashed vegetables.*
- *Wash all cutting boards and knives thoroughly with soap and hot water after each use.*
- *Thoroughly wash and/or peel all fruits and vegetables before eating them.*

### **SEPARATE**

- *Separate raw meat from other foods in your grocery shopping cart, refrigerator, and while preparing and handling foods at home.*

### **COOK**

- *Cook meat thoroughly. The internal temperature of the meat should reach 160° F (71° C). Use a food thermometer to check.*
- *Don't sample meat until it's cooked.*

### **Don't Drink the Water!**

Avoid drinking untreated water, particularly when traveling in less-developed countries.

## **For Cat Lovers**

*Don't give "Fluffy" away, but be aware that *T. gondii* infects essentially all cats that spend any time outdoors. Cats get this parasite by eating small animals or raw meat that's been infected. The parasite is then passed on through the cat's feces. It doesn't make the cat sick, so a pregnant woman may not know if her cat has it.*

### **Follow these tips:**

- *If possible, have someone else change the litter box. 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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**Note:** *If you have a cat and are concerned about exposure to Toxoplasma, talk to your doctor or healthcare provider.*