

# Toxoplasmosis in Pregnancy

## *What is toxoplasmosis?*

Toxoplasmosis is an infection that babies can get from their mothers before birth. If you have this infection during pregnancy, it can harm the baby.

## *How does it occur?*

Tiny organisms called *Toxoplasma gondii* cause the disease. These organisms are protozoa, not bacteria. People are most commonly infected by eating raw or undercooked meats that contain these organisms. Approximately 14% of pork meat and 10% of lamb meat contains *Toxoplasma gondii*. The bowel movements of some cats and insects in the soil also contain the organisms. You can become infected by not washing your hands after handling a cat or cleaning a litter box.



An unborn baby may be infected anytime before delivery. The infection passes to the baby through the placenta. The earlier the baby is infected, the more severe the effects are. Also, the later

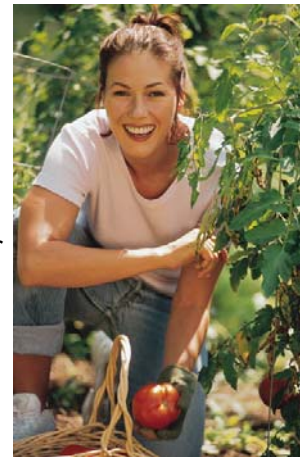
in the pregnancy that the mother is infected, the more likely it is that the baby will become infected.

If you are exposed to toxoplasmosis more than 6 months before you become pregnant, you are not likely to pass the infection to your baby. However, if your first exposure occurs a few months before your pregnancy or while you are pregnant, your baby has a high risk of becoming infected. There are tests you can have to see if you were exposed earlier.

## *What are the symptoms?*

In most cases the mother's symptoms of the disease are mild. Sometimes there are no symptoms. If symptoms appear, it is usually about 10 days after exposure to infected, poorly cooked meat or contact with an infected cat's bowel movements. Symptoms the mother may have are:

- φ rash
- φ fever
- φ weakness
- φ swollen glands
- φ night sweats
- φ muscle pain.



Many infected babies do not show any symptoms at birth, but most develop problems later. If a newborn has been infected with toxoplasma, some possible symptoms or problems are:

- φ fever
- φ rash
- φ loss of hearing
- φ enlarged liver and spleen
- φ jaundice
- φ inflammation in the eyes
- φ extra fluid that puts pressure on the brain
- φ a small brain
- φ chills
- φ muscle pains
- φ swollen glands
- φ calcium deposits in the brain
- φ mental retardation
- φ seizures.

Toxoplasmosis may cause miscarriage or stillbirth.

## *How is it diagnosed?*

The doctor will ask about your symptoms and examine you. Blood tests will be done to see if you are infected.



# TOXOPLASMOSIS IN PREGNANCY

The following tests and exams may be done to diagnose the infection in a baby:

- φ ultrasound scan during pregnancy to look for slowed growth, calcium deposits in the brain, a very small brain, and swelling of the abdomen
- φ blood test
- φ x-rays of the head
- φ lab tests of fluid from the brain or spine
- φ an eye exam.

*How is it treated?*

If you are less than 3 months pregnant, you will not be given medicine. The medicine can be especially harmful to the baby during this time and can cause birth defects.

If you are more than 3 months pregnant, you may be given medicine. Even at this point the medicine may harm the baby. If you are taking medicine, it is usually stopped 4 weeks before delivery.

A newborn's infection can be treated with medicine. However, the medicine may not cure damage to the brain or nervous system.

*How long will the effects last?*

Most toxoplasma infections are cured within a few months after treatment.

If a baby is infected late in the pregnancy, the baby may have a mild form of the disease and may not have any symptoms.

If a baby is infected early in the pregnancy, the baby may suffer severe permanent effects, such as:

- φ blindness
- φ mental retardation
- φ seizures
- φ death.

*How can I help prevent toxoplasmosis?*

To help prevent getting toxoplasmosis while you are pregnant:

- φ Eat only well-cooked meat.
- φ Avoid handling cats, especially outdoor cats. If you have contact with a cat, wash your hands thoroughly afterward.
- φ Avoid contact with cat litter and soil that may contain cat bowel movements. Have someone else clean the litter box every 24 hours.
- φ Wash your hands thoroughly after working in the yard or with soil.

*should not substitute the visit to your doctor nor his/her advice for your health care.*

*Accuracy of the content is current to the date of printing.*



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