

# Toxoplasmosis

## *Information Sheet*

### **What is it?**

Toxoplasmosis is an illness caused by the protozoa *Toxoplasma gondii* that lives in wild and domestic animals, including rats, sheep, goats, pigs, cattle and birds. The main host of this organism are cats; this is the only animal where *Toxoplasma* breeds in the gut. Most cats are not infectious; kittens and young cats are more likely to be a source of infection for a short period after they themselves become infected.

Toxoplasmosis is not a notifiable disease under the Health Act 1956.

### **How does a person become infected?**

People usually contract the illness when they come into contact with the faeces of infected animals, especially cats. Children are commonly infected by ingesting *Toxoplasma* cysts from dirt in sandboxes, playgrounds and yards in which cats have defecated.

Infections may be acquired from eating raw or undercooked meat, or by eating food or drinking water contaminated with cat faeces. Ingestion of unpasteurised milk from infected goats and cattle has been known to spread the disease.

### **What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?**

Many *Toxoplasma* infections are asymptomatic, i.e. the person shows no signs of illness. For those that do fall ill, symptoms include fever, sore throat, tiredness and swollen lymph glands.

The illness usually takes 10 to 23 days for the symptoms to show after you have been infected from eating undercooked meat and 5 to 20 days if you have picked up the infection from cats.

Diagnosis can only be confirmed by tests arranged by a doctor.

### **How bad is it?**

The illness is unpleasant and can last for days or weeks. The illness can be very severe in those people who have compromised immune systems.

If a woman becomes infected in early pregnancy, this can lead to miscarriages and stillbirths or the baby may suffer from brain damage. Later in pregnancy, the disease is milder but can cause eye problems in babies.

For advice, testing and treatment, you will need to visit your doctor. Your doctor may prescribe medication.

## **Will I need time off school, childcare or work?**

Your Public Health Nurse or Health Protection Officer from your local Public Health Unit can give you advice on this. Generally you can return to work, childcare or school when you are feeling well enough to attend.

## **How do I avoid the illness?**

The key preventative measures, especially for pregnant women, are:

- Always wash and dry hands thoroughly:
  - after handling raw meats
  - after touching or handling animals or their faeces (stool, poo, tūtae), especially cats
  - after gardening
- Thoroughly cook meats – there should be no traces of blood or pinkness
- Keep raw meats separate from cooked foods during preparation and storage
- Wash chopping boards, utensils and equipment after preparing raw meats
- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly to remove all traces of soil
- Wear gloves when gardening and wash your hands afterwards
- Wear gloves when cleaning out kitty litter trays or cleaning up cat faeces and wash your hands afterwards
- Avoid unpasteurised goat or cows milk or products made from unpasteurised goat or cows milk
- Always treat or boil drinking water sourced from streams, rivers, shallow bores or the roof
- Feed cats well to discourage hunting (they can pick up the infection from rodents)
- Cover children's sandboxes when not in use to prevent cats using them as litter boxes

## **For further information please contact:**



MidCentral Public Health Service  
Palmerston North: (06) 350 9110  
Whanganui: (06) 348 1775

Free health advice  
when you need it  
  
**Healthline**  
0800 611 116  
[www.healthline.govt.nz](http://www.healthline.govt.nz)