Is it dangerous to be pregnant and have a cat?

When you are pregnant, advice comes from all sources; family, friends, random concerned strangers, dr google and more. You may hear about a disease called TOXOPLASMOSIS and have some fears or concerns, especially if pregnant.

What is Toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by Toxoplasma gondii, a parasite that can infect animals and people. The parasite is infective to both carnivores and herbivores by ingestion of either cysts in meat (called tissue cyst) or ingesting the baby forms (called a sporulated oocyst) from the soil or ground or through the placenta during pregnancy.

The symptoms of the disease in healthy individuals are generally mild and include fever, malaise and swollen glands. In immunocompromised individuals and in the developing foetus infection can occur through the placenta and the disease can be more serious.

How are cats involved?

Toxoplasmosis must complete part of its life cycle inside the cat. Cats become infected by eating raw meat that contains tissue cyst or from ingesting the sporulated oocyst from the ground or plants. The cyst invades the intestine and produces oocyst that are shed in the faeces. These oocysts are NOT immediately infective and must undergo further maturation (called sporulation)– this can take 1-5 days after the faeces has been passed.

How do humans catch Toxoplasmosis?

The most common source is exposure to raw or undercooked meat containing tissue cysts. It is also possible to become infected through ingestion of oocyst through contamination of water, unwashed vegetables, unpasteurised milk with soil contamination of food. Babies are most at risk through placental contamination that occurs during pregnancy if mum has never been exposed.

Does that mean I should rehome my cat if pregnant? Can I "catch" toxoplasmosis from my cat?

Owning a cat DOES NOT mean that you will be exposed to Toxoplasma gondii or develop Toxoplasmosis. Infection directly from cats is NOT considered a primary risk factor and although cats are part of the lifecycle, as we mentioned above, the most common source is from food contamination.

When a cat first becomes infected, it will shed UN-sporulated oocysts for 2-3 weeks. The UN-sporulated oocysts are **not** immediately infective and must sit around the environment for 1-5 days before they sporulate or mature and become infective. Warm,

freshly passed stool generally does not contain infective oocysts. Scoop up and dispose of faeces immediately to minimise risks.

Shedding does NOT continue for the life of the cat. Kittens and not older cats are the higher risk. **Overall, by following the precautions below, owning a cat while pregnant is NOT a problem.**

What precautions should I take to reduce the risk of infection?

Food preparation: avoid eating raw or undercooked meat or unpasteurised milk or dairy products. Wash all fruit and vegetables prior to consumption. Use separate cutting boards for meat and vegetables. Freeze meat at less than –12C for at least 24hours prior to consumption.

Hygiene: hand washing before preparing food and eating, especially after handling soil or cat litter. Disinfect all surfaces that encounter raw meat.

Personal protection: wear gloves while gardening or dealing with soil and preparing raw meat

Prevent exposure of your cat to sources of infection: do not feed raw meat, avoid exposure to intermediary host such as cockroaches, rodents, birds, other small mammals, that if preyed upon, may have tissue cysts or be contaminated with soil.

Cleaning the litter tray: scoop faeces twice a day and dispose of it responsibly. By NOT allowing the faeces to "sit around" for more than a day, means that it can be removed from the environment before it becomes infective. Remember the oocyst must mature in the faeces before it becomes infective. Wear gloves if pregnant or immunocompromised. Wash hands after handling trays. The better option of course, is to ask your partner to take over litter tray duties.

Cover sandpits to avoid neighbourhood cats defaecating in the area.

Consult your doctor regarding Toxoplasmosis testing prior to becoming pregnant. Surprisingly, over a third of the human global population has already been exposed to toxoplasmosis and as the risk in pregnancy is greatest if you have never been exposed before, prior exposure may be a strange blessing.

Please contact Vet HQ if you have any further concerns or questions.

Dr Caryn Wun