

## **We're Pregnant, - What About Our Cat?**

*Healthy adult cats are destroyed needlessly because of well meaning but incorrect beliefs some people have about cats and pregnancy. Here is the science, so you make your own decisions. You can even show this to your doctor or specialist to discuss the issue rationally.*

### **Why Are Doctors So Afraid Of Cats When I'm Pregnant?**

Cats are one of the sources of a little protozoal bug called *Toxoplasma gondii*, which can infect humans. Up to 35% of women of child bearing age are already immune to this bug when they become pregnant. For the other 65%, if they get infected with this bug *during* pregnancy there can be some nasty problems for the baby.

### **What Does This Toxoplasma Do?**

Toxoplasma is common worldwide in mammals and birds. Around 80% of adults who get this bug don't know they have it. The rest get 'general' symptoms like fever, a rash, aches and pains, swollen glands (lymph nodes) and a sore throat. If you are immunosuppressed (eg cancer treatment, HIV) the problems can be worse.



Thanks to James Powell for the photo!

It can't be passed from person to person, BUT it can be passed from pregnant mother to the developing baby. If this happens the bug can cause miscarriage, stillbirth or death just after birth, or it can cause brain problems like blindness or epilepsy, or spleen or liver problems. If a pregnant woman is diagnosed with Toxoplasma, antibiotics are available for treatment, and the pregnancy and baby are monitored.

### **Is The Cat The Victim, Or The Offender?**

Most commonly Australian adults get Toxoplasma from eating raw or undercooked meat, or unprocessed milk and milk products. People fond of gardening can get it from soil. Some people get it from their watertank, because animals or birds can leave faeces on the roof. Kids can get 'Toxo' from the animal and bird faeces found in sandpits. Occasionally humans can also get it from salted, cured or dried meat, or raw eggs. That's why so many people already have immunity to Toxoplasma.

Cats are also a natural host to Toxoplasma. It is excreted with their faeces BUT it can't infect a human for 24 hours after excretion. This means litter trays can be a source of infection ONLY IF they aren't cleaned out daily. Cats get 'Toxo' from soil, or from hunting small animals that have it, or from contaminated water (see above) and young cats tend to shed more Toxoplasma than older cats.

### **Do I Have To Get Rid Of The Cat?**

NO! It's a big myth that you have to get rid of your cat when you are pregnant. You can still enjoy your friend, you just take the same precautions that every other pregnant person does. (See below).



Thanks to Danelle from NCPG for the photo!

### **Indoor-Only Cats Are Special!**

Because cats can get the disease from infected soil or hunting birds and mammals, cats kept indoors have a much lower infection rate. Yet another reason to keep your cat indoors 100% of the time!

### **How Do I Avoid Infection?**

You avoid infection by taking the simple, normal precautions that you would use when working with any animals, and avoiding the most common route of infection - certain foods.

*This advice is of a general nature and is not a substitute for professional assistance.*

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**Precautions to avoid infection include:**

- Don't eat raw milk and eggs when you are pregnant, or salted/dried/cured meats like salami
- Freezing meat for 3 days minimum, also tends to reduce infection
- Wash any soil off vegetables and rinse them with running water before you eat them
- Wash hands after handling pets
- Clean litter trays daily and wear gloves when cleaning. A quick litter tray rinse with boiling water is useful. Some people also recommend delegating litter tray cleaning duties to your partner while you are pregnant.
- Keep cats off benchtops and dining tables
- Feeding commercial pet food rather than raw foods to the cat when you are pregnant is also a good idea, especially for young cats.



Thanks to Bajimbi Cattery for the Photo!

Some people don't recommend getting a new cat while you are pregnant and to avoid playing with kittens, but the real risk is very low. Keeping pets away from your face and washing your hands after playing with pets should be normal practice for all pet owners anyway.

**How Do I Know If I'm Infected?**

Your doctor can test you for antibodies – usually two blood tests some weeks apart. If you have owned cats before or own one currently, you might already be immune. While you should be careful when you are pregnant anyway, if you don't have antibodies you have to be more careful.

**What About When The Baby Is Born? Won't The Cat Sit On The Baby And Suffocate It?**

This is an urban myth. Babies are warm, get lots of attention and are part of the family, so of course you cat will be interested, in the same way as if you brought a new kitten or cat into the house. Most cats understand the concept of a 'kitten human' and will often protect a baby, not sleep on it. Make sure your cat has its own special eating/sleeping quiet space, spend quality time with your cat and keep **all** pets out of the nursery. If you are concerned, your vet has many ideas to help you feel more confident.

**Will The Cat Attack The Baby Out Of Jealousy?**

Jealousy is a human emotion, and cats are cats. Stress is a more likely reaction than jealousy – with changed routines, strange smells and humans behaving oddly. Most cats understand that the noisy pink 'human kittens' must be treated nicely. Cats show stress by urinating in odd places (keep enough clean litter trays around), by altered behaviours or even very rarely aggression (usually to adults). If you are concerned, talk to your vet, who has a whole list of things that can help.



Thanks to Rob Wainright for the photo!

**I Need More Information!**

There are many resources you can use to help get your cat ready for a baby. The Victorian DPI has an excellent resource for all Australians: 'We Are Family' which is a great start to a fabulous relationship between your family and your pets. Go to <http://new.dpi.vic.gov.au/we-are-family> for more information

**References:**

- <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/ideas/bluebook/toxoplasmosis>
- <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/2046568>

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