symptoms of toxoplasmosis at birth, but many are likely to develop signs of infection later in life. Loss of vision, mental retardation, loss of hearing, and death in severe cases, are the symptoms of toxoplasmosis in congenitally infected children.

In immunodeficient people—those undergoing immunosuppressive therapy (e.g., for cancer or organ transplantation) or those with an immunosuppressive disease such as AIDS—enlargement of the lymph nodes, ocular and central nervous-system disturbances, respiratory disease, and heart disease are among the more characteristic symptoms. In these patients—especially those with AIDS—relapses of the disease are common, and the mortality rate is high.

In the past, immunodeficient people and pregnant women were advised to avoid cats. However, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) now advises that this is not necessary.

**What can I do to prevent toxoplasmosis?**

There are several general sanitation and food safety steps you can take to reduce your chances of becoming infected with Toxoplasma:

- Do not eat raw or undercooked meat. Meat should be cooked to a temperature of at least 160°F for 20 minutes.
- Do not drink unpasteurized milk.
- Do not eat unwashed fruits and vegetables.
- Wash hands and food preparation surfaces with warm soapy water after handling raw meat.
- Wear gloves when gardening. Wash hands after gardening.
- Wash hands before eating (especially for children).
- Keep children’s sandboxes covered.
- Do not drink water from the environment unless it is boiled.
- Do not feed raw meat or undercooked meat to cats. Also, do not give them unpasteurized milk.
- Do not allow cats to hunt or roam.
- Do not allow cats to use a garden or children’s play area as their litter box.
- Remove feces from the litter box daily and clean with boiling or scalding water.
- Pregnant women, and persons with suppressed immune systems, should not clean the litter box.
- Control rodent populations and other potential intermediate hosts.
T
oxoplasmosis is a disease caused by a single-celled parasite called Toxoplasma gondii (T. gondii). Toxoplasmosis is one of the most common parasitic diseases and has been found in nearly all warm-blooded animals, including pets and humans. Despite the high prevalence of T. gondii infection, the parasite rarely causes significant clinical disease in cats—or any species.

What is toxoplasmosis?

How will toxoplasmosis affect my cat?

Most cats infected with T. gondii will not show any symptoms. Occasionally, however, clinical disease— toxoplasmosis—occurs. When disease does occur, it may develop when the cat's immune response is not adequate to stop the spread of tachyzoite forms. The disease is more likely to occur in cats with suppressed immune systems, including young kittens and cats with feline leukemia virus (FeLV) or feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV).

The most common symptoms of toxoplasmosis include fever, loss of appetite, and lethargy. Other symptoms may occur depending on whether the infection is acute or chronic, and where the parasite is found in the body. In the lungs, T. gondii infection can lead to pneumonia, which will cause respiratory distress of gradually increasing severity. Toxoplasmosis can also affect the eyes and central nervous system, producing inflammation of the retina or anterior ocular chamber, abnormal vision, and changes seen by impression smears for distinctive pathologic changes. The presence of significant IgG antibodies to T. gondii is a healthy cat suggests that the cat is susceptible to infection and thus would shed oocysts for one to two weeks following infection.

How are people infected with Toxoplasma gondii?

Contact with oocyst-contaminated soil is probably the major means by which many different species—rodents, ground-feeding birds, sheep, goats, pigs, and cattle, as well as humans living in developing countries—are exposed to Toxoplasma gondii. In the industrialized nations, most transmission to humans is probably due to eating undercooked infected meat, particularly lamb and pork. People also become infected by eating uncooked vegetables and unwashed fruits and vegetables than from handling cat feces.

Can I "catch" toxoplasmosis from my cat?

Because cats only shed the organism for a few days in their entire life, the chance of human exposure is small. Owning a cat does not mean you will be infected with the disease. It is unlikely that you would be exposed to the parasite by touching an infected cat, because cats usually do not carry the parasite on their fur. It is also unlikely that you can become infected through cat bites or scratches. In addition, cats kept indoors that do not hunt prey or are not fed raw meat are not likely to be infected with T. gondii.

In the United States, people are much more likely to become infected through eating raw meat and unwashed fruits and vegetables than from handling cat feces.

How is toxoplasmosis diagnosed in cats?

Treatment usually involves a course of an antibiotic called clindamycin, which act together to inhibit T. gondii reproduction. Treatment must be started as soon as possible after diagnosis and continued for several days after signs have disappeared. In acute illness, treatment is sometimes started on the basis of a high antibody titer in the first test. If clinical improvement is not seen within two to three days, the diagnosis of toxoplasmosis should be questioned.

No vaccine is as yet available to prevent either T. gondii infection or toxoplasmosis in cats, humans, or other species.