

# Walker Valley Veterinary Hospital

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## TOXOPLASMOSIS

### *What is Toxoplasmosis?*

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by infection with a microscopic single-cell protozoal organism. Cats are the definitive hosts, but virtually all warm-blooded animals, including people, can be infected with this organism.

### *How common is Toxoplasma in cats?*

Toxoplasma occurs worldwide and infection in cats is similarly widespread. Up to 50% of all cats have been exposed to the organism. Most will never have any symptoms of the disease. Infection rates are higher in outdoor and stray cats. In contrast, infection is uncommon in pet cats that do little or no hunting, and are fed primarily or exclusively commercial cat foods.

### *How is Toxoplasma transmitted?*

Cats are usually infected by ingesting the organism present in the tissues or feces of another infected animal (an 'intermediate host'), usually a rodent. The Toxoplasma organism replicates first locally in the intestinal tract of the cat, and is often contained there. In some cats, particularly if their immune defenses are compromised, the

Toxoplasma organisms can invade beyond the intestine and spread into various organs of the body. There, they may cause enough damage to cause signs of disease or may become dormant in a tissue cyst.

### *What are the symptoms of Toxoplasmosis in cats?*

Most cats that are exposed will have no symptoms. Cats that do develop clinical disease have non-specific symptoms including: lethargy, depression, weight loss, fever, eye disease, neurologic disease, respiratory disease, and GI disease. Such disease may be acute (rapid in onset) or more chronic with periods of illness interspersed with periods of some recovery. It is important to remember that Toxoplasma is a rare cause of disease in cats.

### *How do people get Toxoplasmosis?*

While cats are usually infected by preying on infected rodents, humans are most commonly infected through food. Undercooked meat and unwashed vegetables are common sources of infection. Ingestion of oocysts from infected cats, for example during gardening in contaminated soil, is a less common source of human infection.

### *How can you diagnose and treat Toxoplasmosis?*

Toxoplasmosis is difficult to diagnose in cats because the signs can be so variable. Blood tests are available that will demonstrate, by the presence of antibodies to the organism, whether a cat has been exposed to the organism. But these tests do not necessarily mean that Toxoplasma is the cause of any disease since most exposed cats do not develop disease. When Toxoplasmosis is suspected in a cat, it is usually treated with a course of an appropriate antibiotic.

***How important is Toxoplasma in people?***

Around 30% of the adult population has been exposed to Toxoplasma. As with infection in cats, the vast majority of people infected with this organism experience no clinical disease at all, or possibly just mild and transient 'flu'-like signs. However, there are also some individuals where significant disease does occur and one situation is particularly important. If a pregnant woman acquires Toxoplasma infection during her pregnancy, the infection may be transmitted to the fetus, and sometimes causes severe damage. This is only a risk though, if the woman acquires the infection during her pregnancy. A woman who has previously been exposed to the organism carries no risk of transmission to a fetus if she subsequently becomes pregnant.

***How can human infection be avoided?***

Although cats are essential to complete the life-cycle of Toxoplasma, numerous studies have shown that people who own cats are not themselves at any higher risk of acquiring infection. Thoroughly cooking meat, washing vegetables, and washing hands, especially after gardening or playing in a sandbox are the best ways to avoid an infection. As an extra precaution, It is recommended that pregnant women not handle cat litter boxes.