

Zoonosis to watch: Toxoplasmosis

A zoonosis (zoh-oh-NOH-sis) is an infectious disease that people can catch from animals, and vice versa. Regular veterinary visits, preventive vaccinations and medications, and good hygiene can help prevent them.

Below are details about a common zoonosis, its symptoms, how it's transmitted, and how to prevent it. Check with your veterinarian to make sure your pet is protected against this and other zoonotic diseases.

What it is

Toxoplasmosis involves a protozoan parasite that infects virtually all warm-blooded vertebrates.

Signs

Cats: Rarely causes clinical signs, but may cause coughing, shortness of breath, fever, weight loss, and lethargy

People: Rarely causes clinical signs, but may cause flu-like symptoms; in people with deficient immune responses it can lead to death, congenital malformation, or mental retardation

How it's transmitted

Cats: Ingesting oocysts (egg cells) in feces and in infected animals like rodents

People: Ingesting uncooked meat and being exposed to infected cat feces

People most at risk

- Everyone is at risk, but especially immunosuppressed people, including pregnant women, fetuses, and children

How to prevent it

- Keep cats indoors to prevent ingestion of infected animals and feces.
- Avoid feeding uncooked meats to cats.
- Remove feces from litter box daily.
- Wash litter boxes with scalding water or steam.
- Allow only nonpregnant people with uncompromised immune systems to clean litter boxes.
- Wash hands thoroughly after exposure to soil, sand, raw meats, and unwashed vegetables.
- Wear gloves when gardening.
- Cover children's sandboxes when not in use.