

# Cats and toxoplasmosis



*Toxoplasma gondii* is a parasitic organism which occurs widely in the human and animal population. In the majority of cases it causes few or no problems, and its ability to spread is very limited. However a few myths and fallacies exist and it's important to dispel these (with a scientific evidence base). Thousands of cats are needlessly and wrongly given up every year when their owners become pregnant, and many thousands of farm cats are at risk of unnecessary destruction or removal because of a perceived risk to livestock, when in fact their removal wasn't needed and can often be counter-productive in reducing the risk. In most cases, this is due to misunderstanding.



## In respect of pet cats and particularly the risk during pregnancy:

- Cats only shed the disease for 2 weeks in their lives. The chances are that if you have had your cat for a while, and/or it's an adult cat, it is no longer infectious anyway.
- Around 30-50% of humans have already got a natural or acquired immunity to toxoplasmosis.
- Cat faeces are only a risk if handled directly and if hands are not washed, and only become a source of risk between 1 and 5 days after the cat has defecated—so cleaning a litter tray daily and washing hands afterwards presents no risk; even better, get someone else to do it.
- Toxoplasma only presents a risk to unborn babies in the first 3 months of pregnancy—thereafter, there is no identified risk to the unborn baby, and there is no risk at all if the above hygiene precautions are taken.
- It may be a risk to those with a weakened immune system—only if sensible hygiene precautions are not taken.
- There can be a higher risk from handling raw meat, eating poorly cooked meat, or eating unwashed vegetables. Avoid feeding your cat raw meat and make sure you buy your own meat from a reliable source and cook it properly.
- Keep outdoor sandpits covered, and when gardening, wear gloves in case a cat toilets there.



Did you know that statistically, cat owners are no more likely to get Toxoplasmosis than non-cat owners, and in fact you are more likely to contract the disease from handling raw meat than from your cat. (source—Cats Protection Veterinary Department research, 2011)

## In respect of livestock (particularly sheep):

- Sheep are a final host for the disease, so if there have been cats around, the sheep are probably already infected if they were ever going to be. The principle concern is that the disease can cause aborting of lambs.
- Cats only shed the disease in their faeces for 2 weeks in their lives, so if you have existing farm cats, especially adult cats, they are probably no longer infectious anyway. The key is to stop the arrival, either by birth or incomers, of new cats.
- Removing or destroying farm cats may vacate a food source and environmental niche that attracts new ones onto the farm. These new cats, if breeding, will produce a rejuvenating and increasing population which still has the potential to begin shedding *toxoplasma gondii*.
- The best option is to neuter and return existing cats (as they are not breeding, no new disease shedders will come about). They will also to certain extent defend their home area, and/or deter newcomer cats from trying to settle.
- Oak Tree Animals' Charity does not support or carry out the close confinement of wild natured feral cats in catteries or rescue centres. We consider this a huge detriment to the welfare of animals and we endorse the neutering and returning of these animals to their home site. We provide a complete and free service to neuter farm cats, with the support of some neuter costs from the charity Cats Protection.



Oak Tree Farm, Wetheral Shields, Carlisle, Cumbria, CA4 8JA. Tel: 01228 560082. Web: [www.oaktreeanimals.org.uk](http://www.oaktreeanimals.org.uk)

Registered Charity 1169511.

Document references and sources: Cats Protection, International Society for Feline Medicine and the Moredun Foundation