

MANAGING YOUR TOXOPLASMOSIS

What Is Toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by a microscopic organism (protozoa) that lives in birds, animals, and humans. It affects the gastrointestinal tract (which includes the mouth, esophagus, stomach, intestines, and anus), heart, nerves, and skin. The disease is most dangerous for pregnant women and people with weak immune systems. This includes people who are receiving chemotherapy, have AIDS, and have an organ transplant.

Children younger than 5 need treatment to prevent eye complications. Other complications include inflammation (irritation, swelling) of the brain and heart and lung damage. If a pregnant woman has the infection early in pregnancy, she may miscarry or have a stillbirth, or the baby may be born with birth defects.

Over 30% of healthy people in the United States may have toxoplasmosis. Many don't know it because they don't have symptoms.

What Causes Toxoplasmosis?

The cause is a microscopic parasite named *Toxoplasma gondii*. The disease can spread by eating undercooked meat from an infected animal (especially lamb and pork) or by handling cat litter or feces if the cat has the infection. People who eat contaminated, uncooked, or unwashed fruits or vegetables that had contact with manure can also get it. Mothers can pass the parasite to unborn babies through the blood.

What Are the Symptoms of Toxoplasmosis?

Most healthy people have no symptoms. Others may have fever, fatigue, muscle aches, headache, and swollen lymph glands.

How Is Toxoplasmosis Diagnosed?

The health care provider makes a diagnosis from a medical history, physical examination, and blood tests.

How Is Toxoplasmosis Treated?

Most people don't need treatment. Others may need prescription drugs such as the antibiotic sulfadiazine or antiparasitic pyrimethamine for 4 to 6 weeks or longer. These drugs can cause upset stomach, sun sensitivity, bleeding, or bruising. The health care provider will do blood tests to watch for side effects.

Activity levels depend on the symptoms.

Acetaminophen or tepid sponge baths can be used to reduce fever. No special diet is needed, but fluid intake should be increased.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Toxoplasmosis

- ✓ **DO** use acetaminophen for aches and fever.
- ✓ **DO** use tepid sponge baths to help reduce fever.
- ✓ **DO** rest until symptoms go away. Slowly increase your activity.
- ✓ **DO** keep health care provider appointments for follow-up blood tests.
- ✓ **DO** use sunscreen when outdoors because the medicine may make you more sensitive to the sun.
- ✓ **DO** wash your hands often with soap and water, especially when you handle meats, vegetables, and fruits.
- ✓ **DO** cook meats well. Wash vegetables and fruits before eating them.

- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if your symptoms don't get better with treatment.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have bleeding, bruising, visual changes, or increased weakness.
- ⊗ **DON'T** eat undercooked meats, especially lamb and pork, uncooked eggs, or unpasteurized milk.
- ⊗ **DON'T** change the cat litter box if you're pregnant, had an organ transplant, are receiving chemotherapy, or have AIDS. If you must change the box, use gloves and wash your hands afterward.
- ⊗ **DON'T** stop taking your medicine before it's all gone unless your health care provider tells you to.
- ⊗ **DON'T** stay in the sun for long periods or forget to use sunscreen.

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NOTES

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

- National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute: Tel: (301) 592-8573; Website:
<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases: Tel: (301) 496-5717; Website:
<http://www3.niaid.nih.gov>

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