

Toxoplasmosis

Background Information

Toxoplasmosis is a parasitic disease that can affect most mammals and birds and is found throughout the world. Cats are the main reservoir of infection. It is a moderately common disease, although most people show mild or no symptoms.

Organism

Toxoplasma gondii

Incidence and Transmission

Reported cases of toxoplasmosis in the UK are fairly rare. However, it is estimated that up to a third of the population are infected with *Toxoplasma gondii* at some time in their lives.

The parasite can remain alive in soil in a cyst form for long periods of time.

The main routes of spread are the ingestion of water, food or soil contaminated with faeces from infected cats, or the consumption of undercooked meat (mainly pork or lamb). The parasite can be spread from infected sheep at lambing time.

There is no evidence of direct person-to-person spread, except between a mother and her unborn child.

Occupations and processes where toxoplasmosis may present a risk

Occupational exposure to *Toxoplasma gondii* may occur in those who:

- are in contact with infected cats or cat faeces;
- are in contact with infected sheep during lambing; or
- work with materials or products from infected animals.

Occupations where there may be a risk of occupationally acquired toxoplasmosis include:

- farmers – particularly during the lambing season;
- zookeepers;
- animal rescue centre and cattery workers;
- gardeners;
- vegetable pickers;
- veterinary surgeons – particularly during lambing or when administering the live vaccine; and

- abattoir workers, meat processing plant workers and butchers.

Clinical Information

The incubation period is generally between one and several weeks. Once infected, the parasite can remain in the body for a long period of time and the disease can return at a later date.

For most healthy people there are no disease symptoms or mild flu-like symptoms. However, toxoplasmosis can be a serious disease in immunocompromised people.

Infection during pregnancy can lead to serious complications including stillbirth, miscarriage or birth defects, including visual impairment and brain damage. Infection in the early stages of pregnancy is more likely to cause adverse effects on the unborn child.

Toxoplasmosis of the eye can occur, particularly in unborn babies and the immunocompromised but also in otherwise healthy individuals. This is a serious eye disease and symptoms include blurred vision and 'floaters'.

Anyone with visual disturbance should visit their GP, as there are effective drug treatments available. People with mild illness do not generally require any medication.

Control

The following control measures reduce the risk of infection:

- Pregnant women or immunocompromised people should avoid contact with sheep and lambs during the lambing season.
- A live vaccine is available for sheep, although it should not be handled by pregnant women or immunocompromised people.
- Cat litter should be changed regularly.
- Pregnant women or immunocompromised people should avoid contact with cat litter.
- Good occupational hygiene practices should be followed, especially washing with warm water and soap.
- Cuts and abrasions should be covered with waterproof plasters.
- Suitable protective clothing should be worn – eg gloves.
- A suitable disinfectant should be used.

Further Information

[Public Health England – Toxoplasmosis](#)

[NHS Choices – Toxoplasmosis](#)

[Defra – Advice to pregnant women during lambing](#)