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AFA Position on Ferrets and Toxoplasmosis During Pregnancy

FAQ

I am pregnant, and I have ferrets Can ferrets transmit toxoplasmosis? Should I give my ferrets away?

If you are pregnant, you probably have heard of toxoplasmosis. Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by the protozoan *Toxoplasma gondii* (*T. gondii*), which exists naturally in the soil.

People can become infected with toxoplasmosis in one of three ways

- Eating raw or undercooked meat, which contains *T. gondii* within tissue cysts;
- Direct ingestion of infective *T. gondii* oocysts, such as handling contaminated soil or cat litter and then touching one's mouth;
- From infected mother to baby during pregnancy, as the infection crosses the placenta.

If a woman becomes infected during her pregnancy, the infection may pass through the placenta to the developing fetus. If infected, the baby can be born with congenital abnormalities or neurological damage, including blindness, deafness or mental retardation.

Cats are the only animal species to shed the infectious stage of *T. gondii*, called "oocytes" in their feces. The *T. gondii* oocytes form when a cat eats an infected bird, rodent or raw or undercooked meat. They then travel to the cat's feces, which in turn decomposes in cat litter or soil. Changing cat litter or gardening in infected soil puts humans at risk of becoming the oocytes' next host. Since oocytes are not infective until 1 to 2 days after passage, daily litter box cleaning is essential. Unfortunately, oocytes can live for up to 18 months without a host, so danger of infection remains after an infected animal has been removed from a particular area.

Other animals can disseminate toxoplasmosis **only if their infected meat is eaten without proper cooking.** A European survey of 1000 pregnant women found that the main source of infection with toxoplasmosis was eating undercooked meat - beef, lamb or pork. The risk of contracting toxoplasmosis from meat was 5 times as great as contracting it from contaminated soil (which can be contaminated with the cat feces) containing the infective oocytes. (Cook – 2000)

Because the majority of ferrets are housed indoors and eat cooked or processed foods, toxoplasmosis in ferrets is extremely rare. Only two reports are known to exist in the literature. Thus, about the only way for a human to become infected with toxoplasmosis from a ferret-- is to eat the ferret--- raw!!

How can I reduce my risk of becoming infected with toxoplasmosis?

If you are pregnant, the American Ferret Association recommends the following guidelines to minimize your potential exposure to toxoplasmosis

Avoid eating uncooked meat, and thoroughly wash all uncooked food, such as vegetables and fruits. Wear protective gloves when working in soil, and wash your hands thoroughly following soil contact. Animal feces can be infected with more than toxoplasmosis, and harsh cleaning solutions may also be toxic to you and your baby. Ask a spouse, friend, or neighbor to help out with litter box duties while you are pregnant. If you must clean up after animals, always wear rubber gloves when changing the litter, and thoroughly wash your hands afterwards. Change litterboxes daily. Keep cat litterboxes out of reach of children, ferrets, and all other pets.

Just because you are pregnant does NOT mean that you have to give up your ferret --or your other pets. Pet ownership has so many benefits that are immeasurable in terms of companionship and love.

References:

Cook AJ, Gilbert RE, Buffolano W, et al Sources of toxoplasma infection in pregnant women European multicentre case-control study. European Research Network on Congenital Toxoplasmosis. British Medical Journal 312:142-147, 2000.

The Humane Society "Pregnancy and toxoplasmosis"; (www.hsus.org)