

Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasmosis is a zoonosis caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. The end host is the cat. Human infection can be congenital or acquired after birth. It is widespread throughout the world.

Cause

The causative agent is the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, a member of the genus *Toxoplasma*, which is an intercellular parasite.

Transmission

We become infected:

- When we touch objects contaminated with cat faeces. *Toxoplasma gondii* is transferred to our hands and from there into our mouths.
- If we eat undercooked or raw meat that is infected.
- If we consume other food (vegetables, milk, or water) that have been contaminated by cat faeces.

The disease is not transmitted between people. However, *Toxoplasma gondii* can be transmitted from an infected mother who becomes infected during pregnancy (acute infection) to the foetus. This can result in miscarriage, stillbirth, or the birth of a child with signs of congenital toxoplasmosis. Infection before birth can lead to permanent consequences, such as mental disability, seizures, and vision impairment.

Incubation and the course of the disease

Most infected people have no symptoms and feel healthy, as their immune system has managed to fight off the infection. However, some may experience a mild fever, feel tired, have muscle aches, and have swollen lymph nodes. Symptoms last for a few weeks and gradually subside. Medication is not necessary. However, in people with weakened immune systems (e.g., those undergoing chemotherapy), the illness can be much more severe, and they may need medication.

Susceptibility to infection

The prevalence of human infection with this parasite varies from country to country. The number of infected individuals increases with age. Both sexes are equally affected.

Treatment

Treatment for toxoplasmosis is not necessary in patients with a normal immune response, unless vital organs are affected or the symptoms are very severe and prolonged. However, in immunocompromised individuals and in cases of acute infection in pregnant women, various medications and combinations are used.

Prevention

Infection can be prevented by:

- Properly cooking meat or freezing it.
- Washing fruits and vegetables.
- Avoiding contact with cat faeces.
- Wearing gloves while gardening.
- Regularly disinfecting cat litter boxes. Pregnant women, in particular, should avoid contact with cat faeces. They should always wear gloves when gardening, as faeces may also be present in the soil. In Slovenia, pregnant women are tested for toxoplasmosis. Pregnant women with an acute infection are treated with antibiotics.
- Cats should not be fed undercooked meat; canned food, which is guaranteed to be free of parasites, is more recommended.