

**The University of Tennessee
Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee
Occupational Health Program**

TOXOPLASMOSIS

People at Risk: Any person who is working with cats or cat feces can be exposed to oocysts of *Toxoplasma Gondii*. Cats are the only species that pass the infective oocysts (eggs) in their feces. Other animals may have the intermediate form of *Toxoplasma Gondii* encysted in tissues. People can become infected by accidentally ingesting oocysts from the environment or the intermediate stages in raw or improperly cooked meat. Accidental ingestion of improperly handled laboratory specimens that are infected with toxoplasmosis may occur, but is not common. There are two situations in which individuals are at high risk for acquiring toxoplasmosis:

1. Any person who is immunocompromised
2. Any woman who is pregnant. The unborn child is particularly vulnerable to infection.

Symptoms: Toxoplasmosis may be asymptomatic or present as mild fever, muscle and joint pain, swollen lymph nodes, and hepatitis. In immunocompromised people the disease can be more severe. It may cause a rash, pneumonia, skeletal muscle problems, heart disease, brain involvement, and death. In women in early pregnancy the unborn child may be affected and result in brain damage or possibly death. The baby may also be born with other congenital defects depending on when the woman is infected.

Diagnosis: Diagnosis of toxoplasmosis in people is done by checking antibody titers. A woman who has a positive titer prior to pregnancy is protected against fetal infection. If antibody status is unknown a woman should be warned of the risk of infection.

Prevention: Litter boxes of cats should be changed daily before the *Toxoplasma* eggs are infective. Gloves and masks should be worn when handling any infected tissue. Pregnant women should not handle these agents or soil.