

Reducing the Risks

Keeping your pets and your family healthy.

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Before you were pregnant, Fluffy the cat and Fritz the hamster were just friendly, furry household companions. However, now that you are expecting, you might be wondering if they can harm your fetus or the newborn. There are infectious agents, called zoonotic diseases, found in many pets that can be transmitted to humans. Though the risk of these diseases affecting your baby is low, any danger can be minimized with a few simple measures (see below).

Toxoplasmosis is the zoonotic infection that is most often of concern to obstetricians and pregnant women. One form of the organism responsible for toxoplasmosis is shed for a brief period of time in the feces of both domestic and feral cats. Because infected cats have no symptoms, there is no way for you to know when they become infected or when they are shedding cysts into the environment. The cysts of this organism are found not only in cat feces but other locations where cats roam: in your yard and garden and in the sandbox at the playground, as well as on unwashed fruits and vegetables. Another stage occurs in raw or undercooked meat.

If a pregnant woman becomes infected with toxoplasmosis for the first time during pregnancy, the organism can cross the placenta and affect the developing fetus. Often this infection causes no symptoms for the pregnant woman, though others may have swollen glands (usually in the neck), fever, headaches, poor appetite, muscle aches, rash, arthritis or stiff neck.

When infection occurs during pregnancy, the rate of transmission to the fetus increases from approximately 15 percent in the first trimester to 65 percent by the end of pregnancy. In severe cases, the infant may have an abnormal head size, epilepsy, developmental delay, visual impairment, hearing loss and many other symptoms. In milder cases, infants may be completely normal at birth yet develop some visual loss in adolescence.

Toxocara (a type of roundworm) is a second zoonotic infection acquired from cats and dogs. It is not a concern during pregnancy but does pose a potential risk to infants and small children. Roundworms are parasites whose eggs are shed in the feces of healthy, but infected, dogs and cats, especially puppies and kittens. Roundworm eggs are extremely hardy and remain in the environment (e.g., dirt, sandboxes) for a long time. When ingested, these eggs can hatch, penetrate the wall of the intestine and migrate through the bloodstream, and cause injury to the lung, liver, brain or eye. Young children are particularly vulnerable because they are more likely to put dirt, contaminated food or other objects into their mouths.

So what can you do to limit the small but real danger of transmitting these zoonotic infections to your fetus or infant? Check out our 10 tips for protecting your family and your pet.

10 tips to protect your family

1. Wash your hands well after any exposure to soil (gardening), sandboxes and raw meat.
2. Eat only well-cooked meat.
3. Wash fresh fruits and vegetables to eliminate contamination.
4. Have a spouse, partner or friend change the litter box. If changing the litter is unavoidable, change it daily. Be certain to wash hands well after changing the litter.
5. Supervise infants sitting on the ground or on the floor. Do not allow them to eat dirt or food that has fallen.
6. Pick up dog and cat feces from the yard daily.
7. Cover sandboxes and play areas to prevent wildlife and strays from contaminating these areas.
8. Take your pet to the veterinarian regularly and have your pet tested for parasites at least yearly.
9. Deworm your cat or dog per your veterinarian's recommendations.
10. Administer year-round products to help control Toxocara infections and other products as directed by your veterinarian to control other parasites.

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