



Fact Sheet

FOOD SAFETY FACTS ON *TOXOPLASMA*

What is foodborne illness?

Foodborne illness occurs when a person consumes food contaminated with pathogenic bacteria, viruses or parasites. This condition is often called “food poisoning”. Many cases of foodborne illness go unreported because their symptoms often resemble flu symptoms. The most common symptoms of foodborne illness may include stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and fever.

What are *Toxoplasma Gondii* and Toxoplasmosis?

- *Toxoplasma gondii* is a microscopic parasite that may infect a wide variety of birds and mammals, including humans.
- Humans become infected when they ingest the *Toxoplasma* infective stages (oocysts and tissue cysts) found in some cat feces and in raw meats.
- Human infections are quite common in Canada and most other parts of the world.

What are the symptoms of Toxoplasmosis?

- Most cases of toxoplasmosis are brief and include slight fever, enlarged lymph nodes and other flu-like symptoms which may not appear for 5 to 18 days after exposure. Some symptoms may last from a few days to several weeks.
- People with extremely weak immune systems may develop severe symptoms such as encephalitis, pneumonia or other life-threatening conditions.
- Infants born with congenital toxoplasmosis may develop permanent symptoms or conditions such as mental retardation or eye, liver or brain diseases.
- Diagnosis involves a blood test, and symptoms can be treated with drugs.

Where could I come in contact with *Toxoplasma gondii*?

- Improper handling of meat (cross contamination) and eating uncooked or undercooked meat may cause toxoplasmosis, as several domestic animals may have tissue cysts in their meat (lamb, mutton, pork and sometimes beef).
- *Toxoplasma* oocysts in cat feces may contaminate your hands while gardening or changing cat litter. Fruits and vegetables in the garden and meat may also become contaminated.
- Pregnant women should be particularly cautious as *Toxoplasma* can be transmitted from mother to fetus. People with weak immune systems should also be careful.

How can I protect myself and my family?

- Cook all meats thoroughly before eating. Whole chicken and parts should be cooked to 82°C-85°C (180°F-185°F) and turkey pieces to 77°C (170°F). Beef steaks and roasts should be cooked as follows: medium rare at 63°C (145 °F), medium at 71°C (160°F), and well at 75°C (170°F). Pork chops and ribs should be cooked to 71°C (160°F).
- Freeze meats to -18°C (0°F).
- After handling and preparing raw meat and poultry, wash your hands and sanitize all utensils and work surfaces with a mild bleach solution (5 ml/1 tsp. bleach per 750 ml/3 cups water).
- Pregnant women and people with weak immune systems should avoid handling raw meat, eating lightly cooked meat, handling cats and cat litter, and gardening.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables thoroughly.
- Change cat litter daily. Cats should be prevented from catching and consuming rodents and birds and should not be fed any raw meat.

What are producers and processors doing to protect consumers?

- Safe food handling practices on the farm reduce the risks associated with *Toxoplasma*. Slaughter houses, food processing plants and retail outlets support these practices when they follow sanitation guidelines and undergo inspections.

How does the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) protect consumers?

- The CFIA administers and enforces 12 Acts governing food safety and food inspection within Canada and at our borders.
- CFIA inspectors monitor food processing in federally registered slaughter and processing establishments.
- CFIA inspectors also check packaging dates and labels at retail stores.
- CFIA laboratories continue to develop quick, cost-effective tests to better detect new and existing pathogens in foods and food manufacturing processes.
- In cooperation with industry, the CFIA is moving towards a modernized, science-based inspection system.

For more information on foodborne illness and safe food handling practices, visit the Canadian Food Inspection Agency website at www.inspection.gc.ca