

The Beasts within us!

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Factoids

- *Toxoplasma gondii* was discovered in 1908 in the gundi; a small rat-like animal from North Africa. *Toxoplasma* parasites can infect any warm blooded animal
- Toxoplasmosis (the disease caused by *Toxoplasma* parasites) can be more severe in some animals compared to others. Marsupials like Kangaroos and the Koala are very susceptible to infection because these animals evolved in the absence of cats which were only introduced to Australia 200 years ago. Animals like cattle and horses are most resistant to the parasite and, although they can still get infected, rarely show any signs of disease.
- The parasite can only complete its full life cycle within a cat.
- Although cats only shed the parasite eggs (oocysts) for a short period of time after they become infected (about 7-14 days), they can release more than a million oocysts into the environment during that time.
- These oocysts can survive in the environment for several months and are very resistant to disinfectants, freezing and drying.
- Humans can pick up an infection with *Toxoplasma* parasites by eating undercooked meat from animals infected with the parasite or by eating the *Toxoplasma* oocysts shed in the faeces of an infected cat. These oocysts can also be found in soil, on unwashed vegetables, dirty cat litter and in water contaminated with infected cat faeces.
- It is thought that 1 in 3 people Worldwide are infected with *Toxoplasma* parasites. However, the infection cannot be passed from human to human (except in the case of mothers and their unborn babies – see below).
- Toxoplasmosis can give a flu-like illness in humans when they become infected however most people don't even realise that they are infected and have no ill effects at all. Once infected with *Toxoplasma* parasites, we develop a life long immunity to the disease.
- *Toxoplasma* parasites only cause problems in humans if the mother becomes infected for the first time during pregnancy as the parasite might be passed to the unborn baby. The parasite can also cause problems in people that are immuno-suppressed (those with cancer, HIV or have had a recent organ transplant).
- There is a blood test available to check whether you are or have ever been infected with the parasite. If you are worried about Toxoplasmosis please speak to your doctor.