



## What can I do to protect my cat and myself?

Basic hygiene can prevent toxoplasmosis. Wear gloves when handling potentially contaminated material (for example, when gardening or handling raw meat), and be sure to wash your hands afterwards. Avoid eating undercooked meat, and thoroughly wash fruit and vegetables before eating. Surface water should be boiled or filtered prior to drinking, and children's sandboxes should be covered when not in use to prevent wandering cats from defecating in them. Scoop litter boxes daily while wearing gloves, and wash your hands afterwards. Pregnant women or immunosuppressed individuals are safest when other household members clean the litter box.

### *Viral Infections*

Most viruses infect only their natural host species. Human viruses, like those that cause the common cold, infect only humans, while feline immunodeficiency virus, feline infectious peritonitis virus, and feline leukemia virus infect only cats. However, one virus that can be passed from cats to humans is rabies, a viral disease resulting from the bite of an infected animal. Cats are highly susceptible to rabies, which attacks the central nervous system, causing a variety of signs. Rabies is almost always fatal. In people, rabies infections usually occur when an infected animal bites a person. In order to protect human health, rabies vaccination of cats is required by law in many areas. Even if your cat is kept indoors, it is important to keep rabies vaccines current because cats occasionally escape outdoors, and because rabid animals such as bats and raccoons occasionally enter houses. To further reduce your risk of rabies, avoid contact with wildlife and stray animals. See a doctor immediately if you have been bitten by an animal.

Common sense and good hygiene will go a long way toward keeping you, your family, and your cat free of zoonotic diseases. Here are a few simple precautions:

- Wash hands before eating and after handling cats.
- Schedule annual checkups and fecal exams for your cat.
- Seek veterinary care for sick cats.
- Keep rabies vaccinations current.
- Maintain appropriate flea and tick control.
- Avoid letting your cat lick your face, food utensils, or plate.
- Consider keeping cats indoors.
- Seek medical attention for cat bites.
- Feed cats cooked or commercially processed food.
- Scoop litter boxes to remove fecal material daily.
- Periodically clean litter boxes with scalding water and detergent.
- Wear gloves when gardening or handling raw meat; wash hands afterwards.
- Cover children's sandboxes when not in use.
- Wash fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Filter or boil surface water before consuming.
- Cook meat to 160°F or 80°C (medium-well-done).

### **About the Cornell Feline Health Center**

This brochure was prepared by the American Association of Feline Practitioners and the Cornell Feline Health Center, Cornell University, College of Veterinary Medicine, Ithaca, NY 14853-6401. The center is committed to improving the health of cats by developing methods to prevent or cure feline diseases and by providing continuing education to veterinarians and cat owners. Much of that work is made possible by the financial support of friends.

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# Zoonotic Diseases What Can I Do from My Cat?



### What is a zoonotic disease?

While most feline infectious diseases affect only cats, and most human infectious diseases affect only humans, it is important to be aware that some of these diseases—called zoonotic diseases—can be transmitted between cats and people. You are much more likely to contract ailments from other humans than you are from your cat. However, simple precautions, common sense, and good hygiene, including careful handling of litter boxes and treating cats with fleas and other parasites, can further reduce the risk of zoonotic disease.

### How are zoonotic diseases transmitted?

Transmission of a zoonotic disease can potentially occur when a person comes into direct contact with secretions or excretions—such as saliva or feces—from an infected cat. Additionally, a disease may be contracted through contact with water or food that has been contaminated by an infected cat. Many zoonotic diseases can be transmitted from fleas or ticks (called vectors) to a person or a cat from another animal.

### Who is at risk?

Most zoonotic diseases pose minimal threat; however, some humans are particularly at risk. Those with immature or weakened immune systems, such as infants, individuals with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), the elderly, and people undergoing cancer therapy, are more susceptible to zoonotic infections than others.

### What are some common zoonotic diseases?

#### Bacterial Infections

*Cat-scratch disease*, also called *bartonellosis*, is by far the most common zoonotic disease associated with cats. Approximately 25,000 people are diagnosed every year in the United States. Cat-scratch disease can occur when a person is bitten or scratched by an infected cat. Fleas may also play a role in the transmission of infection. People with cat-scratch

disease usually have swollen lymph nodes, especially around the head, neck, and upper limbs. They may also experience fever, headache, sore muscles and joints, fatigue, and poor appetite. Healthy adults generally recover with no lasting effects, but it may take several months for the disease to go away completely. People with compromised immune systems may suffer more severe, even fatal, consequences.

Some healthy cats are continuously or intermittently infected with cat-scratch disease bacteria, but antibiotics do not reliably cure infection in these cats and are not currently recommended. However, avoiding scratches and bites (for example, by not allowing children to play roughly with cats), controlling fleas, and keeping cats indoors all reduce the risk of cat-scratch disease. Because most cases of cat-scratch disease result from contact with kittens, immunosuppressed people should avoid such contact.

*Salmonellosis*, another common bacterial disease, can cause diarrhea, fever, and stomach pain beginning one to three days after infection. Salmonellosis usually resolves on its own. However, some people require medical attention because the diarrhea is severe or the infection is affecting other organs. People usually get salmonellosis by eating contaminated food, such as undercooked chicken or eggs. However, cats and other animals—even those that appear healthy—can carry and pass salmonella bacteria in their stool. Salmonella bacteria are more commonly harbored by cats that feed on raw meat or wild birds and animals. Feline infection can be prevented by keeping cats indoors and feeding them cooked or commercially processed food. Human infection can be prevented by wearing gloves when cleaning litterboxes, (especially if used by a cat with diarrhea) and washing hands thoroughly afterwards.

#### Parasitic Infections

Fleas are the most common external parasite of cats. While fleas cannot thrive on humans, their bites can cause itching and inflammation. Fleas may also serve as vectors for cat-scratch and other zoonotic diseases. Flea-infested cats may become infected with tapeworms from fleas ingested while grooming.



Children, albeit rarely, can also become infected with tapeworms from inadvertently ingesting fleas.

Some feline intestinal parasites, including roundworms and hookworms, can also cause disease in people. Children are particularly at risk due to their higher likelihood of contact with contaminated soil. Visceral larva migrans, a potentially serious disease that can affect the eyes and other organs, results from inadvertent consumption of roundworm eggs (e.g. when soiled fingers are placed in the mouth). Cutaneous larva migrans, an itchy skin disease, is caused by contact with hookworm-contaminated soil. Proper hygiene, including washing hands before meals, cleaning soil from vegetables, and reducing exposure to cat feces (e.g., by covering children's sandboxes when not in use) can prevent infection. Anti-parasite medications for kittens and annual fecal exams for adult cats can reduce environmental contamination and the risk of human infection.

#### Fungal Infections

*Ringworm* is not caused by a worm at all; it is a skin infection caused by a group of fungi. Infected cats most often come from environments housing large numbers of animals. In cats, ringworm usually appears as a dry, gray, scaly patch on the skin. In humans, ringworm often appears as a round, red, itchy lesion with a ring of scale around the edge. Ringworm is transmitted by contact with an infected animal's skin or fur, either directly or from a contaminated environment. Infected cats continuously drop fungal spores from their skin

and fur; these spores, which can survive for many months, can be spread from a household. Children are at risk of infection. To reduce the risk of infection, then, thoroughly clean the household.

#### Protozoal Infections

Protozoans are single-celled organisms. The most common protozoal infection in cats is *cryptosporidiosis*, *giardiasis*. *Cryptosporidiosis* and *giardiasis* are common in both cats and people, and are often spread by a common source—contaminated water—not by each other. To prevent infection, schedule annual fecal exams for your cats, and medicate your cats with your veterinarian. Other precautions include wearing gloves while handling cat material, washing hands after handling cats, and filtering any surface water.

*Toxoplasmosis* is caused by the protozoan *Toxoplasma gondii*. People with weakened immune systems, or infants whose mothers had an infection during pregnancy, can develop the disease. It commonly becomes infected through consumption of raw meat, or by inadvertently ingesting contaminated soil on unwashed hands. Unfortunately, pregnant and immunosuppressed individuals are often at risk. To prevent *Toxoplasmosis*, however, avoid becoming infected from dirt.

Cats can become infected with *Toxoplasma gondii* from rodents, birds, or anything they eat. The parasite in its feces is not infectious until it becomes capable of causing disease. It can persist in the environment for long periods and continue to contaminate sandboxes, or any place where a cat has defecated.