

Line from litterbox to toxoplasmosis tenuous

By DENISE FLAIM
Newsday

The woman called with a bittersweet announcement.

The good news: She was pregnant.

The bad news: She was returning the kitten she had bought from Joan Bernstein, who breeds Tonkinese cats in Center Moriches, Suffolk County.

Along with admonitions to avoid alcohol and hot tubs — individually or in tandem — pregnant women invariably are warned about contact with cats, because of the concern that feline feces can transmit toxoplasmosis.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 60 million Americans carry the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite. Those with healthy immune systems often do not notice, exhibiting mild, flu-like symptoms or none at all.

But an active toxoplasma infection during pregnancy can cause blindness and brain damage in the unborn infant, as

well as stillbirth or pre-term labor.

Bernstein told her caller that there was no need to part with her cat if a few simple precautions were followed: She should wear a surgical mask and gloves when cleaning the litterbox — or, better yet, have someone else do it.

The current conventional wisdom among doctors is that pregnant women who take adequate precautions against toxoplasmosis need not give up their cats. Some experts go so far as to say that cats have been unfairly singled out for spreading this highly infectious disease, when in fact they carry little blame.

"The chances of a pregnant woman catching toxoplasmosis from her cat is extremely rare," says veterinarian James Richards, director of the Feline Health Center at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University in Ithaca.

As proof, he points to a study conducted in six large European cities and published in the July 2000 issue of the *British Medical Journal*. It found, he says, "abso-

lutely no association between toxoplasmosis and having a cat, litterbox cleaning or having a cat that hunts."

Instead, the study concluded that the main risk factors for acute toxoplasmosis infection were eating undercooked lamb, beef or game (30 to 63 percent of infections), contact with soil (6 to 17 percent), and travel outside Europe and North America.

"Contact with cats," the study concluded, "was not a risk factor."

Still, many physicians continue to focus primarily on them. A report in the December issue of *Contemporary OB/GYN* magazine found that, of the 1,459 physicians responding, 1,364 recommended that their cat-owning patients not clean the litterbox. But only 1,101 mentioned avoiding raw or undercooked meat and only 888 recommended wearing gloves while gardening — even though those activities represented a greater risk of infection.

Feline scapegoating started, Richards

explains, when "it was discovered that cats shed infectious stages of toxoplasmosis in their stool. It's from that that all this fear arose, and it has really just permeated all the information sources."

"Once cats are infected, they will for a short period shed these toxo-organisms in their stool — maybe for a week or two," Richards explains. "And the instant they are shed, they are not infectious. They have to mature for a day or more before they are." Which means that frequent cleaning and scooping of a litterbox — always with gloves if a woman is pregnant — lowers the negligible risk even further.

Casual contact with an infected cat is not considered particularly dangerous, as the parasite is not usually carried on the fur.

As for keeping cats free of infection to begin with, "don't let them hunt, and don't let them eat raw meat," Richards advises.

In short: Keep the precautions, but ditch the high panic.

ALBANY TIMES-UNION
2/8/2005