

And Baby Makes Three Pregnancy, Babies and Cats

Don't fall prey to myth and misinformation.

Being pregnant doesn't mean you have to give up caring for your cat. Cats and babies have coexisted peacefully for thousands of years. Learn the real scoop on pregnancy, toxoplasmosis, cat litter boxes, and — and the simple steps you can take to reduce the risk.

Toxoplasmosis

Because toxoplasmosis can cause birth defects in children, pregnant women sometimes assume that they must get rid of their cat. However, toxoplasmosis is a rare disease in countries like ours and is one that can easily be avoided. This is entirely unnecessary, as a few simple measures will thoroughly safeguard against catching the disease, especially from your cat. Fortunately, cat ownership does not necessarily increase the risk of acquiring toxoplasmosis. Cats should continue to be sources of joy and companionship to their owners during pregnancy and following the birth of a child.

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by a parasite that can infect your cat if she eats prey already harboring the parasite or comes into contact with contaminated soil. Toxoplasmosis is rare among indoor-only cats.

Because it's difficult for cats to transmit toxoplasmosis directly to their caregivers, a pregnant woman is generally unlikely to contract the disease from her pet cat. Eating raw or undercooked meat is the most common way that humans contract toxoplasmosis. If you eat meat, wash off all surfaces and utensils that touched raw meat, and don't prepare meat and raw foods like salads on the same cutting board. Wash your hands thoroughly after handling raw meat.

Reducing Your Risk of Toxoplasmosis

Even though it is unlikely that a woman will contract toxoplasmosis from her cat, it's a good idea to err on the side of caution. The following recommendations will help cat owners expecting a child to avoid contracting toxoplasmosis.

- Avoid undercooked meat.
- Wash all uncooked vegetables thoroughly.
- Be certain to wash all cutting boards and utensils that may have come in contact with meat before using them to prepare other foods.
- Wear gloves when working in soil. If gloves are not worn, hands need to be washed thoroughly following soil contact.
- Ask a spouse, friend, or neighbor to help out with litter box duties while you're pregnant.
- If you don't have help to keep the litter box clean, wear rubber gloves when changing the litter and thoroughly wash your hands afterwards.
- Change your cat's litter on a daily basis.



Planning Ahead for the Introduction

First, some common questions and myths. No, cats do not suck the air out of a baby; that is an old wives tale. It's easy enough to block kitty's access to the crib (suggestions follow).

Let's look now at how we can get your cat to accept your new baby with open paws. From your cat's point of view, a baby who shows up with no advance warning is a loud, threatening, and attention-stealing invader. It doesn't have to be this way. Babies and cats can be buddies.

And Baby Makes Three

Pregnancy, Babies and Cats *continued*

Planning Ahead for the Introduction

The key to getting a cat to accept a major jolt to her routine is soften the blow and introduce the change gradually. In the case of a new baby, you want your cat to be as used to baby stuff as she can possibly be beforehand, so that when your baby comes home, kitty is not totally shocked by this very interesting human life form.

- Get kitty used to baby sounds and smells. Long before the big day, wear the baby lotions and powders that you will be using. Let kitty sniff you, and help her develop positive associations with the new scents by praising her and giving her a treat.
- Get a recording of a baby crying - possibly from a neighbor or relative who has a baby. You can also tape babies crying in a pediatrician's waiting room. Play the tape for kitty, starting with low volume and short length, and working up to full volume and duration. Again use positive attention and treat rewards.
- If at all possible, invite a friend or family member with a baby to come over, with their baby, for a short visit, followed by a longer visit. Or two or three. During the visits, let kitty walk around, but it's best to have baby sitting on a lap.
- A baby seat or playpen might work well, also. Play with your cat as long as you don't bother or scare the baby.
- If you're building or preparing a nursery, give kitty a chance to become used to the new setup one step at a time. Let her get her curiosity thoroughly out of the way. Remember to keep up your daily interactive play sessions. Make kitty feel like she's a part of all this, not an outsider.
- Set up the crib long in advance of baby's homecoming. Make the crib uninviting (to a cat). Fill several soda cans with pennies and tape the openings of each can. Fill the crib with these soda cans. If this doesn't deter kitty, you can buy netting that fits over the crib.
- You can also block access to baby's room by installing an interior screen door - this is actually quite effective.
- Give kitty plenty of exposure to toys, mobiles, and other baby accoutrements. You want all these things to have lost their novelty for her weeks before baby comes home.

Cat ownership has many benefits that are immeasurable in terms of companionship and love. The steps outlined in this article will allow your cat to remain as a beloved member of the family.