

ZOONOTIC DISEASE IN CATS – GENERAL INFORMATION

This handout will review some of the common health concerns that arise for people who have cats as pets. For information on other companion animals or for more general information, be sure to ask your veterinary healthcare provider.

What is a zoonotic disease?

Zoonotic disease or zoonoses are terms used to describe an infection or disease that can be transmitted from an animal to a human being.

Am I at risk for contracting a zoonotic disease from my cat?

Current evidence supports the fact that pets pose a minimal zoonotic risk to their human companions. Cats kept indoors are exposed to fewer diseases that could be transmitted to humans. Your risk may be slightly higher if you fall into one of the following groups:

People with compromised immune systems from disease or medications

- People with AIDS/HIV
- People on chemotherapy or receiving radiation therapy
- People who are elderly or have chronic diseases
- People born with congenital immune deficiencies
- People who have received organ or bone marrow transplants
- Pregnant women (a fetus's immune system is not fully developed, and the pregnant woman's immune system is altered so that she won't reject the fetus)



If you fall into one of these categories, it doesn't mean you have to give up your pet! It simply means that you should take some basic precautions such as not contacting your cat's feces directly, monitoring for any signs of illness in your cat and washing your hands after extensive handling of your cat.

It is important to keep in mind that numerous studies prove that the benefits of having a pet far outweigh the risks. Sharing your home with a pet is often just what your doctor ordered!

What are the most common infections I could contract from an animal?

While the risk of contracting any of these illnesses is low, here is a list of common zoonotic diseases. Note that many of these infections are the result of ingesting undercooked meat, fish and poultry or involve exotic animals and travel.

Anisakiasis	Lymphocytic Choriomeningitis
-------------	------------------------------

Anthrax Babesiosis Brucellosis Campylobacteriosis Ciguatera Fish Poisoning Colorado Tick Fever Cryptosporidiosis Cysticercosis Dengue Dermatophytosis (Ringworm) Domoic Acid Poisoning (Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning) Echinococcosis (Hydatid Disease) Ehrlichiosis Encephalitis (specify etiology) <i>Escherichia coli</i> 0157:H7 Infection Food borne disease Giardiasis Hantavirus Infections Leptospirosis Listeriosis Lyme Disease	Malaria Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning Plague, Human or Animal Psittacosis Q Fever Rabies, Human or Animal Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever Salmonellosis (Other than Typhoid Fever) Scombroid Fish Poisoning Swimmer's Itch (Schistosomal Dermatitis) Toxoplasmosis Trichinosis Tuberculosis Tularemia Viral Hemorrhagic Fevers (e.g., Crimean-Congo, Ebola, Lassa and Marburg viruses) Water-associated Disease Yellow Fever Yersiniosis
---	--

The most common zoonotic diseases of cats include:

- Ringworm
- Toxoplasmosis
- Salmonellosis
- Campylobacter infection
- *Giardia* infection
- Cryptosporidium infection
- Roundworms

What can I do to reduce the risk of contracting a disease from my cat?

Proper litterbox cleaning is the most effective way to reduce the risk of contracting a disease from your cat. Here are simple guidelines you should follow if you fall into a risk category:

Place your litterbox away from the kitchen and other areas where you prepare or store food. If possible, have someone who is not at risk clean the litterbox. Otherwise, clean the litterbox daily, since the organism that causes *Toxoplasmosis* takes at least twenty-four hours to become infectious. Use disposable litterbox liners and change them each time you clean the litterbox. Don't dump the litter. If you dump litter, you could potentially aerosolize an infectious agent and inhale it. Be sure to slowly pour the litter or simply twist and close the litterbox liner.



Clean the litterbox at least twice a month with hot water, letting the hot water stand in the box for at least five minutes. This simple cleaning technique will kill the *Toxoplasma* organism.

Wear disposable gloves and discard them after each use. Thoroughly wash your hands after cleaning the litterbox.

In addition to Toxoplasmosis, is there anything else I can get from my cat's feces?

Cats can occasionally be the source for intestinal ailments including some bacterial infections (*Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*) and some intestinal parasites (*Giardia*, *Cryptosporidium*, and roundworms.) These diseases can be spread to people by direct contact with the feces of an infected cat or by contact with soil that has been contaminated by the feces of an infected cat. Many other animals also carry these infections. *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* are most often spread through undercooked meat or improperly prepared food.

How do I know if my cat has a zoonotic disease?

Cats that are carrying one of these infections will sometimes, but not always, have loose stools or diarrhea. All newly acquired cats are at a higher risk and should have their feces tested by your veterinarian as soon as possible.

What will happen if I get one of these diseases?



This group of bacterial and parasitic infections will usually only produce temporary symptoms in someone with a healthy immune system. For people who are immunocompromised, however, these infections can be life-threatening. Ringworm can be a stubborn infection but is curable with persistent treatment.

How can I prevent my cat from getting bacterial infections and intestinal parasites?

Preventing these diseases is easier than you think. Some simple guidelines to keep your cat healthy are:

- Feed your cat a high-quality commercial cat food.
- If you must feed your cat meat, poultry, or eggs, cook them well.
- Wash hands thoroughly after handling raw meat.
- Keep your cat indoors and prevent it from hunting.
- Keep your cat away from other cats and have any new cats examined by your veterinarian before exposing them to existing cats.

Can I get HIV/AIDS from my cat?

No, numerous studies prove that you cannot contract HIV/AIDS from your cat. Both Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) are contagious between cats, but neither of them can infect humans, nor can the human virus infect cats.

However, FeLV and FIV suppress the cat's immune system, making him or her more susceptible to zoonotic infections which could then be passed on to you. If you are immunocompromised, it is not recommended that you keep a cat infected with FeLV or FIV. If you do keep a cat with one of these diseases, be extra careful about following general hygiene and litterbox guidelines. To minimize the risks of contracting FeLV or FIV, keep your cat indoors. If your cat goes outdoors, ensure that it is tested and examined at least once a year by your veterinarian.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM
© Copyright 2005 Lifelearn Inc. Used with permission under license. February 20, 2008*