Pets & HIV Infection

Although the risk is low, people infected with HIV are at risk of getting an infection from handling pets or other animals. There are several simple precautions you need to take while handling animals. You can enjoy the many benefits of owning a pet. But people with HIV infection should know the health-related risks. Animals may carry infections that may be harmful to you. Your decision to care for pets should be made with certain precautions in mind. If you plan to own a pet, you should also be educated about the type of pet you want.

- **To protect your pet and yourself from infection, be careful about what your pet eats and drinks.** Feed your pet only commercial pet food. Cook all egg, poultry, and meat products thoroughly before giving to your pet. Do not let pets drink from toilet bowls or get into garbage. Pets should not be allowed to scavenge, hunt, or eat another animal`s stool.
- **Do not handle animals that have diarrhea.** If the diarrhea lasts for more than 1 or 2 days, have a friend or relative take your pet to your veterinarian. Ask the vet to specifically check for infections such as cryptosporidiosis, salmonellosis, and campylobacteriosis.
- **If you are getting a pet from a pet store**, animal breeder, or animal shelter, look into the sanitary conditions and licensing of these sources. If you are not sure about the animal's health, have it checked by your vet.
- **Do not touch or handle stray animals**. You could get scratched or bitten. Stray animals may carry opportunistic infections - or even *rabies*. This is a deadly virus transmitted by animal bites.
- **Do not touch the stool of your pet.** Always wash your hands after playing with or caring for animals. This is especially important before eating or handling food.

Infections Carried by Animals			
Disease	**Type of Organism**	**Transmission**	**Illness**
Bartonellosis.	Bacteria.	cat scratch.	skin lesions.
Campylobacteriosis.	Bacteria.	animal stool.	diarrhea/blood infection.
Cryptosporidiosis.	Bacteria.	animal stool.	severe diarrhea.
Mycobacteriosis.	Bacteria.	aquarium water.	skin lesions.
Salmonellosis.	Bacteria.	animal stool.	diarrhea/blood infection.
Toxoplasmosis.	Parasite.	cat stool.	brain infection.

ABOUT CATS

You should be aware of the risks of certain infections such as Toxoplasmosis and Bartonellosis and of diarrheal illnesses caused by *Salmonella* or *Campylobacter* that can be spread by cats. If you choose to adopt or buy a cat, get one that is at least 1 year old and in good health**. Older cats are less likely to carry infections that are harmful to you.**

Clean litter boxes every day. This will further lower the risk for toxoplasmosis and diarrheal illnesses. If you must clean the box, wear gloves and wash your hands immediately after changing the litter.

Keep your cat indoors to prevent it from hunting. These precautions will reduce your risk for Toxoplasmosis and diarrheal illnesses.

To avoid being scratched or bitten by your cat, have its nails clipped. There may be other scratch prevention alternatives, such as the attachment of soft toenail tips, to discuss with your vet. If you do get scratched or bitten, wash the wounds immediately to avoid infection.

TOXOPLASMOSIS

Cats can carry Toxoplasmosis and transmit it to people through their feces. This fact has made many "at risk" people wary of cats. But people also get this disease from eating inadequately cooked meat or from contact with

dirt that has been contaminated with cat feces. Many of us are already infected with this organism. Recent studies show that most people with HIV disease that develop Toxoplasmosis are actually developing a "reactivation" of something they already had. But, that did not make them sick until their immune system deteriorated. Thus, removing pet cats from "at risk" households will have little effect on the number of new cases of Toxoplasmosis with HIV disease. It is still important to prevent the cat from becoming infected by following good hygiene habits and safe pet guidelines. Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by the single-celled parasite Toxoplasma gondii. All species of animals, including humans can get Toxoplasmosis.

- Cats are the only animal species to shed the infectious stage in their feces. But all animals can spread Toxoplasmosis if infected meat is eaten.
- Infection occurs by eating rodents, raw meat, cockroaches, flies, or by having contact with infected cats, infected cat feces, or contaminated soil.
- The chance of getting infection is good if your cat is allowed to hunt or is fed raw meat.
- You probably will not know if your cat has Toxoplasmosis. Most infected cats show no symptoms. But sometimes there is transient diarrhea, or more rarely, other symptoms, such as pneumonia, hepatitis or neuralgic disease.
- Chances are unlikely you will acquire the infection from your cat. But caution is advised for high-risk groups.
- Testing your cat for Toxoplasmosis probably will not be helpful. Results in cats are questionable and interpretation controversial. In fact, a positive, healthy cat is probably safer than a negative cat since it has already been exposed and is immune. A negative, healthy cat is probably susceptible to infection, and thus prevention is most important. To prevent your cat from getting sick, do not feed raw meat and prevent your cat from hunting by keeping it indoors. People rarely get Toxoplasmosis from an infected cat. More often it comes from eating undercooked meats, unwashed fruits and vegetables, congenitally (in utero), or by not washing your hands after gardening or handling soil. If you are healthy and get Toxoplasmosis, probably nothing will develop. Or, flu-like symptoms such as fever, malaise or lymph node enlargement and/or soreness may develop. If you are pregnant, and if and only if it is your first exposure, birth defects and possible fetal abortion/death may occur. If you have an immunocompromised system, possibly life-threatening central nervous system disorders may occur.

THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE NEED TO BE VERY CAREFUL:

- People with compromised immune systems.
- People with AIDS/HIV.
- People on chemotherapy.
- People who are aged.
- People with congenital immune deficiencies.
- Pregnant women (a fetus' immune system is not fully developed).

Most cases of Toxoplasmosis seen in people with immune system disorders are due to a reactivation of a previous infection. If you test positive for Toxoplasmosis, your caregiver may put you on a preventative therapy. If you test negative, be more cautious regarding prevention. If you test negative and become infected with Toxoplasmosis during pregnancy, you risk having a baby with birth defects. If you test positive, you already have had it, and therefore have built up antibodies to protect you and the fetus from a new infection. It is unlikely you will get an infection after having it previously. After the first infection, like chicken pox, you do not get it again. But if your immune system becomes suppressed, an old infection can become reactivated. Most cases of Toxoplasmosis in people with AIDS are a reactivation. To prevent this infection:

- Cook meats well.
- Wash hands after handling raw meats.
- Wash vegetables.
- Wear gloves while gardening.
- Keep your cat healthy.
- Use caution around litter boxes.
- Always practice good hygiene.

You can get tested for it. Consult your caregiver.

FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS (FELV) AND FELINE IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (FIV)

Both of these viruses are different from the human (HIV) virus. Both are contagious among cats. But neither has been shown to infect humans, nor has the human virus been shown to infect cats. However, these diseases suppress the cat's immune system. This makes it more susceptible to other diseases which it could pass on to you. Even though it would be difficult to part with your loving cat, it is probably best not to keep a FeLV or FIV positive cat if you have an immunosuppression problem yourself. If you do keep your cat, be extra careful about following the other safe pet guidelines.

CAT SCRATCH DISEASE

Cat Scratch Disease has been reported in people with AIDS (PWA). This is a bacterial disease that can be acquired from the scratch of a cat. It is not the same as a cat scratch, which can get secondarily infected. This disease is not completely understood, and there may be other sources of infection. It appears to be most commonly acquired from kittens. So declawing an older cat will not likely change the risk of the disease. In general, this disease is still uncommon in PWA's and is treatable. The present recommendation is to keep your cat's nails trimmed monthly. If you get scratched by a cat, clean the wound with a tamed iodine solution such as Betadine. Call your caregiver for further advice. Do not let your cat lick any wounds you may have, as this is another way the disease appears to be spread. Declawing is an option you may consider. But this will be more likely to prevent frayed furniture than Cat Scratch Disease.

FISH AND ILLNESS

Watching fish swim has been shown to lower one's blood pressure. But be cautious around the aquarium water since several people at risk have acquired unusual infections from the water. Be especially careful if you have cuts or sores on your hands.

DOGS AND ILLNESS

Although dogs are considered man's best friend, be sensible and follow safe pet guidelines. Dogs do carry some diseases that could be spread to you, and are probably more risky if they drink out of the toilet.

BIRDS AND ILLNESS

Birds can carry some diseases that can be transmitted to people, but are considered safe pets, especially if you are careful. All new birds should be checked by an avian veterinarian.

- All newly acquired birds in the parrot family should be screened for psittacosis. Your vet is better able to evaluate other diseases for which your bird should be screened.
- Never expose your bird to other birds (including pigeons and other wild birds) that have not been tested and quarantined for 45 days. Avoid casual contact such as going to the pet store for wing clips and nail trims. Ideally birds should be cared for at home rather than in a boarding facility.
- Individuals with compromised immune systems are at highest risk. But any individual with increased contact with birds could become infected. Currently there are no known cases of transmission of psittacosis from a bird to a person with HIV. Still, the potential exists.

If you have an immune system problem or AIDS you are at risk. Other individuals at risk include: people who are elderly, those with congenital immune deficiencies or diabetics. Neonates as well as the fetus during pregnancy are at high risk, also. These diseases are transmitted by direct contact with stool and nasal discharges or breathing dried, powdered droppings. Breathing feather dander is the cause of allergic alveolitis if you are sensitive to bird protein. Imported birds are most likely to carry MAIS. Cockatiels have the highest incidence of psittacosis. Regarding allergic alveolitis, any bird can transmit this disease. But cockatoos, cockatiels and

amazons that produce more "powder" than other birds would be more potentially irritating.

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