



Adopting a cat that had potentially zoonotic diarrhoea

This handout is aimed at providing more information for owners interested in adopting a cat that has previously had a diagnosis of an infectious zoonotic agent in their faeces while in Cats Protection's care. It aims to discuss the simple precautions that can be taken to avoid catching an infection from your cat's faeces.

A proportion of all household cats will carry parasitic, viral or bacterial bugs in their faeces. Most owners will be unaware of it, as the cats usually remain healthy. In some cats, they may cause diarrhoea. Cats can acquire these bugs at any time through inadvertent contact with the faeces of infected cats or by ingesting undercooked meat.

What is a zoonotic disease?

Zoonotic diseases are contagious diseases spread between people and animals and can be caused by bacteria, viruses, parasites and fungi.

How are zoonotic diseases transmitted?

Transmission of zoonotic diseases can potentially occur when a person comes into contact with secretions or excretions – such as saliva or faeces – from an infected cat. Additionally, a disease may be contracted through contact with water or food that has been contaminated by an infectious agent.

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.

How at risk am I?

Studies have shown that the agents causing zoonotic diarrhoea in cats will only very rarely infect a person. It is much more common for people to acquire infections from other people, contaminated food and water than from their pets. It can be difficult to say whether a cat may be harbouring a zoonotic agent in the faeces as many cats do not show outward signs of infection.

To keep risks to an absolute minimum, all pet owners should observe good hygiene when clearing away faeces or emptying the litter tray. For those at a higher risk (such as young children or the elderly), it is recommended they do not take on litter tray duties, or if this is not possible they should wear gloves to do so. The litter tray should be cleaned daily. Hands should be washed frequently after contact with your pet. Do not share food utensils. Pets should be dewormed regularly on the advice of your veterinary surgeon. Cats with vomiting or diarrhoea should be taken to the vet for diagnosis and appropriate treatment.

What are the common zoonotic agents found in cat faeces?

The potentially zoonotic infections found in the faeces of cats can be grouped as bacterial (salmonella, campylobacter and E. coli) or parasitic (cryptosporidium, toxoplasma, giardia).

Your cat has been previously diagnosed with (tick as appropriate):

Salmonella – most human infections are attributed to food poisoning, with very few documented cases of cat to human transmission. A number of animals (and people) may carry Salmonella without showing any signs of illness. This means that finding Salmonella in the faeces of a cat can be a purely incidental finding

Campylobacter – most human infections are attributed to food poisoning. In dog and cats, infection is common and usually does not result in signs of illness. Usually the finding of Campylobacter in a cat's faeces is incidental, and it doesn't usually result in illness for the cat

E. coli – most human infections arise as a result of food poisoning. Many dogs and cats carry E. coli without any signs of illness

Cryptosporidium – most human infections occur after drinking contaminated water. Cats can also be infected by drinking contaminated water. It is very rare for a person to contract cryptosporidium from their cat

Toxoplasma – people commonly become infected by eating undercooked or raw meat, or by inadvertently consuming contaminated soil on unwashed or undercooked vegetables. Unfortunately, pregnant women or immunosuppressed individuals are often mistakenly advised to remove cats from the household to reduce the risk of toxoplasmosis. However, people are highly unlikely to become infected from direct contact with their cats. For further information, see <https://www.tommys.org/pregnancy-information/im-pregnant/antenatal-care/infections-avoid-pregnancy/toxoplasmosis-pregnancy>.

Giardia – most human cases result from ingestion of undercooked meat or contaminated water. Numbers of cases of proven cross-infection between people and cats have been small and it appears unlikely that people acquire Giardia from healthy cats

Why might some cats be at more risk than others?

Most cats will clear these types of infections themselves. However some cats will experience diarrhoea as a result of the infection, perhaps because of other underlying or compounding problems with their digestive system. The episode of diarrhoea may be short-lived, lasting only a few days. Some cats experience more chronic episodes of diarrhoea. It can be difficult to predict which cats will develop a gut upset, but if the cat is experiencing stress (like being in a shelter or moving house) this can make diarrhoea more likely. Very young cats, elderly cats and cats who are already unwell are at a higher risk of becoming sick with these gut bugs.

Once the diarrhoea has resolved, many cats will continue to harbour infectious bugs for some time in their faeces.

How are these infections treated in cats?

There are no treatments available that will reliably eradicate these organisms from the body. Usually these infections are self-limiting. The cat may remain free of any symptoms and the infection will pass without any treatment needed. Sometimes cats may develop diarrhoea which may warrant veterinary treatment.

How long will a cat remain infected for?

Cats may silently carry the infectious organism for several months after the initial infection, despite treatment. The risk to people is extremely low if the cat does not suffer from any accompanying diarrhoea.

As the risk to a person from a non-diarrhoeic cat is so low, Cats Protection has made the decision to rehome affected cats once the cat is in good general health and is free of diarrhoea. It is detrimental to the welfare of a cat in rescue care to continue testing the faeces potentially for several months

while waiting for a negative result. We know that many healthy cats carry these organisms in their faeces asymptotically, and often the significance of a positive faecal test is unclear.

Will my existing cat be at risk?

It is unlikely that infectious diarrhoea will spread among other cats in the household if the cats do not have diarrhoea. Regular litter tray cleaning and appropriate hygiene measures will help to keep the risks minimal.

In summary

Many cats can carry infectious agents in their faeces which have the potential to infect people. Studies have shown that cat-to-human transmission is rare. The risks of cross-infection to a person are very low when the cat does not have diarrhoea. All owners should observe good hygiene measures when dealing with cat faeces.

Further information

Cats Protection produces a leaflet which provides information on *Digestive Disorders – Vomiting and Diarrhoea* which can be accessed on our website at www.cats.org.uk.

Cats Protection is part of The Cat Group, a collection of professional organisations dedicated to feline welfare through the development and promotion of policies and recommendations on the care and keeping of all cats. The Cat Group has produced a policy statement on zoonoses which is available here: www.thecatgroup.org.uk

Further information is also available from International Cat Care. See www.icatcare.org.

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