

Toxoplasmosis

Prepared by Bill Bigler, PhD
DOH, Bureau of Epidemiology

Toxoplasma gondii is ubiquitous in nature, infecting virtually all mammalian species.¹ This obligate intracellular protozoan was first discovered in gondis, a small cricetine rodent, maintained at the Pasteur Institute of Tunis.² Toxoplasmosis remained an obscure disease of laboratory rabbits and guinea pigs at the Pasteur institute in Paris until 1937 when it was identified as a cause of congenital meningoencephalitis in infants. The majority of *Toxoplasma* infections are usually asymptomatic and undiagnosed, although a clinically acute acquired infection is characterized by fever, headache, with lymphadenopathy or pneumonia and resembling infectious mononucleosis.³ Pregnant patients with acute infection can transmit the disease to the fetus causing abortion, stillbirth or severe congenital abnormalities.

Serological surveys have shown that by the age of 50 the prevalence of infection can range from 30-40 % in adult populations in some areas of the United States.⁴ Toxoplasmosis is usually transmitted to people in poorly cooked or raw meat or exposure to *Toxoplasma* oocysts excreted in the feces of infected cats.⁵ Also latent infections may become active in immunocompromised individuals and cause neurologic or pulmonary disease.³

Toxoplasmosis was declared a reportable disease in Florida in 1964 and during the next decade only six human cases were reported. The number of cases averaged 10 per year from 1974-83 (101) and 1984-93 (98), however 44 cases were reported in 1994 and 1995 (22 each year). An analysis of these cases showed that most were black (64%), and male (57%) with a median age of 36 (range 6 to 84 years). Cases occurred in 13 counties throughout the state, but 18 (41%) were reported by St. Lucie County. The vast majority of the St. Lucie County cases were black (89%), and evenly divided by sex, with a median age of 36 (range 23-72 years). The presumed source of infection or immune status of these cases was not recorded. In 1996, 14 confirmed cases, mostly white (71%) and evenly divided between the sexes were reported from 9 counties. One-half (50%) were from Dade, Broward and Palm Beach Counties. While it has been assumed that most cases result from exposure to *Toxoplasma* oocysts from cats, serologic surveys have shown relatively high prevalence of *T. gondii* antibodies in horses (18%), armadillos (19%), raccoons (18%), black rats (13%) and opossums (11%).^{6,7}

References

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