



CATS AND PREGNANCY

You do NOT have to get rid of your cat!

Pregnancy when you have a cat presents some challenges, but don't worry, none of them are even remotely insurmountable. You just need a little planning and know-how. Cats and babies have coexisted peacefully for thousands of years. This article deals with preparing for a new baby; the second part of this series discusses what to do once baby arrives.

The Facts About Pregnancy and Cat Litter

Because toxoplasmosis can cause birth defects in children, pregnant women sometimes assume that they must get rid of their cat. This is entirely unnecessary, as a few simple measures will thoroughly safeguard against catching the disease, especially from your cat. 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.

Note that cats who contract toxoplasmosis do not always show symptoms. To prevent getting infected with the disease, whenever you scoop or clean the litter box, wear disposable gloves and wash your hands immediately afterward. Even better, get a friend or adult member of the family to take over litter box maintenance while Mom is pregnant.

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.

If you garden, wear gloves when working in the soil. The toxoplasmosis parasite lives in the dirt, so also wash your hands well after gardening.

Many people naturally acquire an immunity to toxoplasmosis, and will not pass it on to their unborn child. In fact, the chances are that you have already been exposed to toxoplasmosis by handling raw meat or gardening without gloves. According to the CDC, "More than 60 million men, women, and children in the U.S. carry the Toxoplasma parasite, but very few have symptoms because the immune system usually keeps the parasite from causing illness." Your doctor can test to see if you are in this group.

First, some common questions and myths. No, cats do not suck the air out of a baby; that is an old wives tale. Yes, it is theoretically possible for a cat to inadvertently suffocate a baby, although there are no reliable reports of that ever occurring, and it's easy enough to block kitty's access to the crib (more details below).

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. 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.

Avoid Too Many Changes

Keep your cat's routine the same as much as possible. This won't always be easy between the hubub of visitors and houseguests and preparing for a new baby, but the effort is well worth it. A predictable routine reduces cats' stress and prevents a host of problems. Ask others to help make sure that your cat gets fed, brushed, and played with in the usual manner.

Don't go overboard and give your cat extra, compensating attention prior to the baby's arrival because it will be impossible to keep that up once you have a baby at home to take care of. But do enlist family members to help kitty feel like a valued member of the family. Let all the adults and kids in your household know how they can help keep both kitty and baby safe, happy, and on peaceful terms.