

Cat Ownership for Immunocompromise People

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Our immune system can be suppressed by many things including diabetes, kidney failure, some types of cancer, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection and treatments for cancer, organ transplantation, and autoimmune disease. Many studies have proven the value of companion animals for immunocompromised people and have shown a decreased prevalence of depression among these owners. However, there are several important guidelines to pet ownership in these situations to protect the health and well-being of the people involved.

General guidelines:

The most common diseases transmissible from animals to people (called zoonoses) are the intestinal infections caused by *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* bacteria. The intestinal parasites *Giardia* and *Cryptosporidia* are causes of diarrhea and are also zoonotic. Two fungal diseases, dermatomycosis (also called ringworm) and sporotrichosis, cause infections of the skin and can be transmitted directly from pet to human. There are also other important diseases to consider and some common guidelines apply to all situations:

- Keep your pet healthy and clean
- Keep your pet's vaccinations up to date and be sure your pet has an annual health exam
- Do not let your pet drink from the toilet
- Keep your pet indoors or outside only on a leash and supervised
- Never feed your pet raw or undercooked meat, raw eggs, or unpasteurized milk
- Have a plan for good flea and tick control
- Keep your pet's feeding and sleeping areas clean
- Ensure your pet is spayed or neutered
- Wash your hands after handling any pet
- Have someone else do the cleaning chores; or if you must, wear gloves and a face mask and use disinfectant when cleaning urine, stools or vomit
- Be very careful when handling any animal under 6 months of age, especially if it has diarrhea or appears to be ill

Specific guidelines for cat ownership:

Cat should be kept indoors to restrict hunting activity and to reduce contact with other animals. Cats can acquire the parasite *Toxoplasma* by eating wild animals or undercooked meat. The oocysts are the infectious form of *Toxoplasma* and they are shed in the stools of an infected cat. The litter box should be kept away from the kitchen and any eating areas. Cat litter should be sealed in a plastic bag for disposal and cleaning should be done while wearing disposable gloves and a face mask. If the box is cleaned

daily, the risk of toxoplasmosis is lessened as the oocysts take more than 24 hours in the environment to become infective. Also take care while working in the garden as cat feces in the soil could carry *Toxoplasma*, so wearing gloves and washing up well are important.

Cats can transmit a bacterium called *Bartonella henselae*, which causes an uncommon disease called cat scratch disease or bartonellosis. The risk of *Bartonella* infection is highest in kittens and in cats with fleas. For immunocompromised people, a healthy mature cat over the age of 1 year would be a better companion than a kitten. The cat's claws should be trimmed short and any scratches or bites should be washed well with soap and water. An antiseptic should be applied and a doctor consulted, especially if any redness or swelling develops. A good plan for flea control should be instituted.

It should be noted that feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency (FIV) are different from HIV. These feline viruses do not infect humans, but both FeLV and FIV can make cats more susceptible to other diseases, some of which may be zoonotic. When adopting a new cat, it should be tested for both FeLV and FIV by a veterinarian.

In general, routine health care for cats is important to protect the people they live with. Yearly physical examinations, fecal tests for parasites, and vaccinations when appropriate should be done. Be prepared to seek veterinary attention quickly in any case of illness, especially if diarrhea or vomiting is involved.

Finally, it may be wise to designate someone to care for your pet if you become ill or hospitalized yourself. Advance arrangements can be very valuable in the case of a sudden illness in either the owner or the pet. Let your veterinarian know if someone in your household is immunocompromised and if any arrangements have been made to designate a person to act as an agent for the pet. It may also be necessary to arrange in advance for a permanent home for the pet should the owner be unable to care for it on a long term basis. Having these arrangements in place can decrease the stress associated with an unexpected or difficult situation.

For further information:

Healthy Pets, Healthy People (Centers for Disease Control)
http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/extra_risk.htm

American Association of Feline Practitioners Zoonosis Guidelines:
http://www.aafponline.org/resources/practice_guidelines.htm

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