

Keep 'Em Both: Cats and Babies

Put your worries to rest: Babies and cats can peacefully co-exist.

Marty Becker, DVM, and Janice Willard, DVM

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When pregnant with my son Ethan, I was a junior in veterinary school and my imagination ran rampant with worries that a zoonotic disease - one transferred from animal to person - might strike my unborn baby. Could Vixen, my loyal, shorthaired calico cat, my companion and comforter, endanger the new life inside me?

A new baby should mark a time of joy for your family. But for some cats, this means the loss of their homes. The truth is, cats, pregnant women and new babies can safely co-exist. You just need to know the risks and how to avoid them.

Avoid Risks

One risk many new parents face is toxoplasmosis. Cases of this disease are extremely rare, but the consequences are serious.

Toxoplasmosis is a parasitic protozoa that can infect other species, in addition to cats. Infected cats are usually asymptomatic, but do shed a large number of the protozoas eggs until their immune systems control the infection. Once a cat develops protozoa antibodies, it ceases to be infective for the rest of its life.

Most human toxoplasmosis infections are non-threatening. If the persons immune system gains quick control, he or she is protected for life. People with diseases such as AIDS or who take drugs that suppress the immune system are at risk for toxoplasmosis. The threat to unborn babies is that a fetus immature immune system cannot protect it yet. The protozoa can cross the placenta and infect the unborn baby.

That said, exposure to toxoplasmosis is easily preventable. The protozoa take up to five days after leaving the cat to become infective, so scoop your cats litterbox daily.

A pregnant woman should wash her hands after playing with her cat and avoid the cats litterbox while she's pregnant, said Drew Weigner, DVM, a feline veterinary specialist at The Cat Doctor in Atlanta. If there is no one to take over the litterbox duties, moms should wear gloves and change the litterbox daily.

You can get tested to see if you have protective antibodies against toxoplasmosis, but even if you are not at risk, these precautions are beneficial.

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) published a brochure called Your Baby and Your Pet and distributed it to OB/GYNs across the country. The response has been overwhelming, said Nancy Peterson, companion animal issues specialist, who spearheaded the campaign. We got 930 responses back from doctors, most of them praising the program. Sadly, a few responders said that they still recommended cat owners get rid of their cat.

I don't hear this [response] very often, anymore, Weigner said. Most doctors are aware of this fallacy.

Worms are another risk for new parents. Sandra Coon, DVM, of Broadway Veterinary Clinic in Seattle, and mother of 8-month-old Oak, recommends a rigorous de-worming program for intestinal parasites if there are pets living with children under 7 years of age. Roundworms live

[and reproduce] in the intestines of animals, Coon said. They can migrate through the human body and end up in unusual places, such as the eyes, and cause blindness, she added. Ask your veterinarian for a recommended deworming program.

Reactions to Baby

Cats vary in their tolerance to environmental change. A new baby means lots of changes: from visits, to new smells, to new behavior patterns from parents. It is hard to predict how each cat will react.

For some cats, it's no problem at all. My cat, Misha, is more concerned that I feed him on time than [he is] with the baby, said Tracy Kroll, DVM, a veterinarian with a behavior practice in Fair Lawn, N.J., and the mother of 10-week-old Ethan. Misha sniffed Ethan, but otherwise seems fine.

"Both of our cats are clingy lap cats, but I never saw any sign of jealousy, said Carol Popolow, DVM, a veterinarian in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y., and mother of 16-month-old William. The cats do jockey for position on my lap when I am holding or feeding the baby. Now that he is a toddler, the cats like to play tag with William and follow him all around the house hoping he will drop a treat.

If your cat shows stress reactions such as eliminating outside of the litterbox or spraying, it may need a quiet space of its own and time to adjust to the changes associated with the new baby. Anger or punishment will make matters worse; your cat needs extra attention. Cuddle with it while the baby sleeps or schedule some extra playtime.

Occasionally I see cats engage in destructive behavior if they perceive they are not getting enough attention once the baby is brought home, said Robin Downing, DVM, a veterinarian at the Windsor Veterinary Clinic in Windsor, Colo. Folks just need to make a short play period each day for the cat.

Some cats get depressed and stop eating when a new infant comes home, Weigner said. They are used to being the center of attention, and now the whole commotion is about the new baby. If no one notices the cat hasn't eaten for a while, it can get quite ill. I recommend [that] new parents spend at least half an hour twice a day with their cats, without the baby around.

Ease the transition of moving a baby into your house by bringing in a blanket with the baby's smells on it a day or two before the infant arrives. [This] is a good way for the cat to get acquainted with the idea that there will be another human in the household soon, Downing said.

And after the baby has come home, consider limiting the number of visitors and the amount of time spent with them.

Baby Safety

The myths that cats will suffocate a sleeping baby or stick their muzzles in a baby's mouth and suck the life out of it, are a challenge to put to rest. However, there is no substantiating evidence that these rumors are true.

Ill-informed people have been warning pregnant women and new mothers away from their kitties ... , said Clea Simon, author of *The Feline Mystique*. Cats don't 'steal an infant's breath, but they do gently sniff at whatever they are curious about. Cats don't 'smother babies, either, but they do like to cuddle against warm creatures on cold nights.

We have found our own cat curled up with our infants, sleeping. If an infant is too young to raise its head, perhaps there is a remote possibility of suffocation if the cat curls up next to the child's

face, Weigner said. I tell my clients not to leave their babies unattended with their cats until [the babies] can easily lift their heads.

Data available to [the Centers for Disease Control] CDC do not support the idea that cats are responsible for serious injury or death to infants, said Peter M. Schantz, VMD, Ph.D., an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. There are two recorded cases of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), in which cats were present, Shantz said. However, no precise information about cause of death was available.

I do not believe that cats pose any risk of smothering babies, said Thomas G. Keens, M.D., SIDS researcher and pediatric pulmonologist from Childrens Hospital Los Angeles. I have actually rarely heard parents express concern that a pet cat would smother a baby, though I would tell them there is no evidence that it happens.

Although there is not hard data incriminating cats as important causes of death or unprovoked injury of infants, I would emphasize that the CDC considers it totally inappropriate to have an unsupervised animal in the young child's [under a year old] sleeping room, Schantz said.

According to experts, the best advice is to allow your cat and baby supervised contact and to keep cats out of the nursery and the crib. One recommendation is to replace the nursery door with a screen door; that way you can hear the baby, but the cat can't enter.

I do not let my cat in the nursery if I am not in there, and I keep the door closed and the monitor on, Kroll said.

Our two cats never wanted to sleep in, or even enter, the baby's crib, Popolow said. However, I do have some really cute pictures of all three of them asleep on the couch together. When the baby was small, the cats did like to smell around his face a lot and would even groom his hair or face if I let them.

A cat can be a wonderful companion for a new mother, Simon said. Plus, children are fascinated by animals, and the opportunity to let your baby feel the softness of fur or the tickle of a whisker is priceless.

It is fine to allow the cat(s) to be close to the baby with supervision, Downing said. Many cats will simply adopt the new baby recognizing that it is a helpless being in need of protection.