

Pets and animal contact safety during pregnancy



Why animal-contact safety matters in pregnancy

Pregnancy involves immunologic and physiologic adaptations that can change susceptibility to some infections and the consequences of infection. This does not mean a pregnant person is fragile or must avoid normal life. It means that certain exposures deserve more deliberate prevention. Zoonotic pathogens may be carried in animal feces, saliva, urine, bedding, cages, tanks, raw pet food, contaminated soil, or barn environments. Some cause self-limited gastrointestinal illness, but dehydration, fever, or systemic infection can be more consequential during pregnancy.

Risk varies by animal species, the animal's health, the setting, and the type of contact. A well-cared-for indoor dog or cat is usually lower risk than contact with animal feces, birthing fluids, reptiles, amphibians, poultry, livestock, or visibly ill animals. The safest approach is not fear-based separation from pets, but targeted risk reduction: wash hands, avoid fecal exposure, use gloves for higher-risk tasks, keep animal areas clean, and ask someone else to perform chores that are best avoided during pregnancy.

Cats, litter boxes, and toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasmosis is caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. Infection during pregnancy can, in some cases, pass to the fetus and cause congenital infection. Cats are the definitive host for the parasite, and infected cats can shed oocysts in feces. However, toxoplasmosis is not spread simply by being near a cat or by ordinary affectionate contact with a healthy cat. Important exposure routes include handling contaminated cat feces, touching contaminated soil, and eating undercooked meat or unwashed contaminated produce.

Pregnant people do not need to give away a cat. The key is to avoid handling cat feces where possible. Ask another household member to clean the litter box. If you must do it yourself, wear disposable gloves, clean the litter box daily, avoid breathing in dust, and wash hands thoroughly with soap and water afterward. Daily cleaning matters because *Toxoplasma* oocysts generally require time after being shed to become infectious. Keep cats indoors when possible, do not feed them raw or undercooked meat, and avoid adopting or handling stray cats or kittens during pregnancy without veterinary guidance.

Gardening is another practical issue. Soil may be contaminated with cat feces even if you do not own a cat. Wear gloves while gardening or handling soil, wash hands afterward, and wash fruits and vegetables well. These measures also reduce exposure to other environmental organisms.

Hand hygiene and household habits that reduce risk

Handwashing is the central safety habit around animals. Wash hands with soap and running water after touching animals, their food or treats, feces, urine, bedding, cages, tanks, toys, leashes, and habitats. Hand sanitizer can be useful when soap and water are unavailable, but it is not a complete substitute after visible contamination, fecal contact, or habitat cleaning.

Keep animals out of food-preparation areas when possible, especially while handling raw foods.

Do not kiss animals on the mouth or allow them to lick your face, open cuts, or mucous membranes.

Cover cuts or abrasions before animal care and clean any new scratches promptly. Separate pet bowls, litter scoops, cage-cleaning tools, and aquarium supplies from kitchen equipment.

Clean animal habitats outdoors or in a utility area when feasible, not in the

kitchen sink.

These habits may sound basic, but they significantly reduce exposure to fecal organisms, parasites, and bacteria. They are also useful after the baby arrives, when infant immune defenses are still developing and household hygiene becomes even more important.

Dogs, bites, scratches, and behavior changes

Dogs are not usually associated with a single pregnancy-specific infection risk in the same way cats are associated with toxoplasmosis, but they can still transmit organisms through saliva, feces, or contaminated fur, and they can cause injury. Pregnancy can alter balance and center of gravity, so a pulling leash or excited jump may increase fall risk. Large dogs, anxious dogs, and dogs with resource-guarding behavior deserve proactive management before the baby arrives.

Use consistent training, avoid rough play, and consider professional behavioral support if a dog shows aggression, intense fear, or unpredictable behavior. Keep vaccinations and parasite prevention current through a veterinarian. Promptly clean bites or scratches with soap and water and contact a healthcare professional for individualized advice, especially if the wound is deep, near a joint, on the hand or face, becomes red or swollen, or if you are uncertain about rabies risk or tetanus immunization status.

Small mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and poultry

Different animals carry different organisms, and some require extra caution during pregnancy. Reptiles and amphibians, such as turtles, snakes, lizards, and frogs, can carry *Salmonella* even when they appear healthy. Backyard poultry can also carry *Salmonella* and other enteric bacteria. Small mammals and birds may expose people to organisms through droppings, urine, bedding dust, bites, or scratches. The practical message is to avoid direct contact with feces and habitat waste and to wash hands after handling animals or their environments.

Do not clean reptile, amphibian, bird, rodent, or poultry habitats in the kitchen sink.

Wear gloves for cage, coop, or tank cleaning, or ask another adult to do these

tasks during pregnancy.

Keep animal habitats away from areas where food is prepared, served, or eaten. Avoid cuddling or kissing reptiles, amphibians, poultry, or animals that may have fecal contamination on their bodies.

Supervise children's animal contact and handwashing, because children can transfer contamination to household surfaces.

If an animal is ill, has diarrhea, has unusual discharge, or has recently given birth, ask a veterinarian and your prenatal care clinician what precautions are appropriate before you provide care.

Farm animals, birthing fluids, and outdoor environments

Farm settings can be meaningful and familiar, but pregnancy warrants special caution around livestock, manure, and animal birthing materials. Contact with animal feces, urine, placentas, birth fluids, contaminated bedding, and soil can expose people to infectious agents. If you live or work on a farm, ask your obstetric clinician, occupational health service, or midwife about pregnancy-specific precautions based on the animals and tasks involved.

As a general principle, pregnant people should avoid assisting with animal births, handling placentas or aborted materials, cleaning heavily contaminated stalls, or working in enclosed areas with aerosolized manure or birthing fluids unless a clinician and occupational specialist have advised otherwise and suitable protective measures are in place. Wear gloves and protective clothing for unavoidable chores, wash hands and forearms afterward, and change contaminated clothing before entering living areas.

Pet food, treats, and kitchen safety

Pet food can be a source of pathogens, particularly raw pet diets, raw treats, and contaminated bowls or feeding surfaces. Pregnancy is a good time to review whether raw pet food is necessary, because raw meat products can carry organisms that may also pose risks to humans. If your household uses raw pet food, discuss safer alternatives with a veterinarian and use strict food-handling precautions.

Wash hands after handling pet food, treats, bowls, and feeding mats.

Store pet food away from human food and out of children's reach.

Use dedicated scoops and utensils for pet food only.

Clean pet bowls regularly and avoid washing them alongside human dishes when there is visible contamination.

Do not allow pets to lick plates, utensils, baby bottles, pacifiers, or food-preparation surfaces.

These measures protect the pregnant person and help establish safer routines for the newborn period.

Building a practical safety plan with your care team

A realistic plan is easier to maintain than a long list of restrictions. Start by identifying the animal-care tasks in your household: litter box cleaning, dog walking, cage cleaning, aquarium care, feeding, grooming, veterinary visits, farm chores, and waste disposal. Decide which tasks someone else can take over during pregnancy and which can be modified with gloves, masks if recommended for dusty tasks, better ventilation, or a different cleaning location.

Your prenatal care professional can advise you if you have had a significant exposure, develop symptoms, or have occupational contact with animals. A veterinarian can help keep animals healthy, update parasite prevention, address diarrhea or behavioral concerns, and advise on diet and litter habits. If you work in veterinary medicine, agriculture, animal rescue, laboratory animal care, or childcare with animal exposure, occupational health input may be especially helpful.