



Litter box cleaning is a fundamental part of cat ownership. The stool of even perfectly healthy cats can carry a variety of bacteria and parasites that are potentially infectious to people. However, with minimal effort and good basic hygiene practices, the risk of acquiring an infection from handling cat litter and litter boxes can be greatly reduced.



Litter Box Bugs

- ✔ Cleaning a litter box can expose a person to bacteria and parasites that are present in cat stool. To develop a disease from this kind of exposure is probably rare, but the overall risk associated with handling cat litter and litter boxes is unknown.
- ✔ Bacteria in cat stool are infective right away. Some can survive a long time in a litter box, while others cannot.
- ✔ Some parasites in cat stool, such as *Toxoplasma gondii*, are passed in a form that is not infectious for the first day or two in the litter box. Therefore, cleaning the litter box daily can help reduce exposure to the infectious form.
- ✔ Keeping your cat on an appropriate deworming program, as directed by your veterinarian, will help keep your cat healthy and also reduce the risk of exposure to parasites for you and your family.

Litter Box Basics

- Litter boxes should be cleaned frequently, ideally daily. This will also help keep your kitty happy so it doesn't start making messes elsewhere!



- Keep dogs out of the litter box so they do not carry or spread dirty litter (and the associated bacteria and parasites) around the house, or become infected themselves!
- Do NOT keep or clean a litter box in the kitchen.
- Get a litter box that is designed to help prevent litter from spilling out, even if the cat digs or buries its stool. If you find litter spills frequently, try a covered litter box or one with higher sides.
- If any litter does spill out of the box, clean it up as soon as possible.
- The area around the litter box should be cleaned and disinfected regularly. Ideally, put the litter box on a floor with a smooth, easy-to-clean surface like vinyl or tile, instead of carpet.

Cleaning Tips for Litter Boxes

- ✔ Stool and clumps of litter from urine (if clumping litter is used) should be removed with a scoop that is ONLY used for doing just this. The scoop should be rinsed periodically in scalding water, but not in a bathroom or kitchen sink.
- ✔ Dispose of all stool and litter directly into a garbage bag.
 - Do not put litter or stool in a backyard compost unit. These units do not produce high enough temperatures to kill all the bacteria and parasites in this type of waste.
- ✔ Periodically, the litter box should be completely emptied and scrubbed to remove any stool or litter that may be stuck to the sides or bottom of the box. Then rinse the box with scalding water and refill it with clean litter.
- ✔ Never clean a litter box in a kitchen or bathroom sink. If you clean the litter box in the bathtub, the tub should be thoroughly cleaned afterwards as well.

Wash Your Hands!

Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and running water after cleaning a litter box or having any contact with cat litter, stool or urine.



Higher-Risk Individuals

Pregnant women, young children and immunocompromised individuals should avoid cleaning litter boxes. But if a person in one of these groups must clean a litter box:

- The litter box should be **cleaned daily**.
- **Gloves** should be worn when handling the litter and the litter box, and hands should be **washed** thoroughly with soap and running water afterwards.
- The cat(s) should not be allowed outdoors, as outdoor cats are more likely to pass certain bacteria and parasites in their stool.

Zoonotic Diseases From Litter Boxes



The following are the more important diseases that people can potentially contract from exposure to cat litter and litter boxes. Please refer to individual disease information sheets for additional details.

Toxoplasmosis:

- ▶ An infection caused by the protozoal parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. Cats shed oocysts (which are similar to parasite eggs) in their stool that can become infective after about 24 hours. Most infections do not cause illness, or may cause mild flu-like symptoms. Serious infections such as encephalitis (infection of the brain) can occur in people who are immunocompromised (e.g. HIV/AIDS, transplant or cancer patients), but are rare in people who are otherwise healthy. In pregnant women *Toxoplasma* can seriously affect the unborn baby; infection can cause congenital defects or even miscarriage.
- ▶ A European study showed that pregnant women who had to clean a litter box were more likely to have antibodies in their blood against *Toxoplasma gondii*, which indicates previous infection with this parasite. However, simply living with a cat was NOT associated with having *Toxoplasma* antibodies.



Bacterial infections that cause diarrhea:

- ▶ Several species of bacteria that can cause diarrhea in people can be passed in the stool of cats. These include *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. They are transmitted by ingestion, or contamination of the hands or food that is then transferred to the mouth. Cats can sometimes carry these bacteria without becoming sick themselves.

Cutaneous larval migrans:

- ▶ This condition can be caused by various species of hookworms, some of which infect cats. Eggs of the parasites are passed in the feces of infected cats, and release larvae which can penetrate a person's skin. The larvae then travel under the skin causing irritation and inflammation. Infection is most likely to occur in young animals and children, but *this condition is very rare in northern regions such as Canada*.

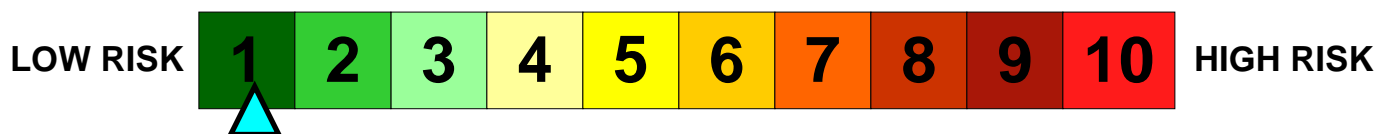
Visceral and ocular larval migrans:

- ▶ These conditions can be caused by various species of roundworms, some of which infect cats. Eggs of the parasites are passed in the feces of infected animals. If the eggs are accidentally ingested, they hatch inside the body, releasing larvae that then migrate through various internal organs (visceral) and occasionally the eye or brain (ocular or neurological larval migrans), causing irritation and inflammation. The ocular form can result in blindness. *These conditions are very rare in northern regions such as Canada*, but if the disease does occur, it can be quite devastating.

Zoonotic Disease Risk

For the **general population**, the risk of transmission of a zoonotic disease from cat litter or a litter box is:

HEALTHY ADULTS / OLDER CHILDREN



Groups at higher risk of disease include **immunocompromised individuals** (e.g. HIV/AIDS, transplant and cancer patients), **infants and young children** less than five years of age, and the elderly. There are also precautions that should be taken by **pregnant women** around cats in order to protect the fetus. For these groups, the zoonotic disease risk posed by handling cat litter or a litter box is likely:

YOUNG CHILDREN / IMMUNOCOMPROMISED PERSONS / PREGNANT WOMEN

