

Parasitic Diseases in Hong Kong

Parasitic diseases can break out in people who consume undercooked food or do not practice proper hygiene. There are three common types of parasitic infections in Hong Kong which may cause dangerous diseases, including paragonimiasis, toxoplasmosis, and angiostrongyliasis.

Paragonimiasis is commonly found in Southeast Asia, including China, Malaysia, and Thailand. An estimated 20 million people worldwide come down with it. People are infected by the parasite *Paragonimus westermani* (lung fluke, or flat worm) from eating raw or undercooked crustaceans. After taking these foods, the parasite larva moves from the intestine to the lungs where it matures into an adult fluke. Many of the symptoms are similar to tuberculosis, such as coughing sputum, fever, and weight loss, which usually appear 6 weeks to 3 months after infection sets in.

Toxoplasmosis is caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. It is contracted through eating raw meat and vegetables contaminated by *Toxoplasma*. This parasite normally infects the intestines of cats and is often present in their droppings. It is sometimes passed on in organ transplants, or through blood transfusion. Infection in pregnant women sometimes leads to congenital infection of the foetus. Such infection occurring in people with abnormal immune systems can become very serious. To prevent being infected, people should avoid consuming raw or undercooked meat and should wash their hands thoroughly after touching cat faeces.

Angiostrongyliasis is contracted through eating raw or undercooked freshwater molluscs and crustaceans, such as snails, slugs, shrimps, and crabs, which carry the larvae of the roundworm *Angiostrongylus cantonensis*. After entering the body, the larvae might crawl from the guts to the brain inflaming the brain and meninges. This infection is common in countries in Southeast Asia and in China. Consuming well-cooked food is one of the most effective ways of protecting yourself from the disease.