

Turtles and other reptiles are risky pets

Turtles are colorful and cute and are often kept as pets. However, many people don't know that turtles and other reptiles like snakes and lizards can carry harmful germs that can make people very sick. For this reason, turtles and other reptiles might not be the best pets for your family, particularly if there are young children, 5 years-old and younger or people with weakened immune systems in your home.



Turtles, and other reptiles, often carry a germ called *Salmonella*, but appear perfectly healthy and clean. People think *Salmonella* infections are caused only by contaminated food, but these germs can also be caught by touching animals, including reptiles or amphibians, such as frogs. *Salmonella* infections can also result from having contact with an animal's habitat, including the water from containers or tanks where they live.

Salmonella germs can make people sick with diarrhea, vomiting, fever, and sometimes abdominal cramps. This illness is called "salmonellosis." Some people can become so sick that they need to go to the hospital. In severe illnesses, the *Salmonella* bacteria may spread to the bloodstream and can lead to death unless the person is treated promptly with antibiotics.

Young children are at increased risk for *Salmonella* illness because their immune systems are still developing. They also are more likely to put their fingers or other items that have come into contact with germs into their mouths. So, families with young children should avoid keeping turtles as pets, and turtles should not be allowed in schools or child care facilities with young children.

Since 1975, it has been illegal in the United States to sell or distribute small turtles with shells that measure less than 4 inches in length. This size was chosen because young children are more likely to treat smaller turtles as toys and put them in their mouths. This ban, enforced by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, likely remains the most effective public health action to prevent *Salmonella* infections associated with turtles.

Since 2006, CDC has received reports of 11 multistate outbreaks, including 6 ongoing outbreaks, and more than

535 cases of laboratory-confirmed *Salmonella* infections linked to contact with small turtles and their habitats. These illnesses resulted in about 85 hospitalizations and one death. Because many people with salmonellosis do not seek medical care or are not tested, it is estimated that 16 times as many illnesses occurred than were reported.

Tips to reduce the risk of illness from turtles and other reptiles:

1. Don't buy small turtles from street vendors, websites, pet stores, or other sources.
2. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water immediately after touching a reptile or anything in the area where they live and roam. Use hand sanitizer if soap and water are not readily available. Adults should always supervise hand washing for young children.
3. Don't let young children handle or touch reptiles or anything in the area where they live and roam, including water from containers or tanks.
4. Keep reptiles out of homes with young children or people with weakened immune systems.
5. Reptiles should not be kept in child care centers, nursery schools, or other facilities with young children.
6. Don't touch your mouth after handling reptiles and do not eat or drink around these animals.
7. Don't let reptiles roam freely throughout the house or in areas where food or drink is prepared, served, or stored, such as kitchens, pantries, or outdoor patios.

For more information on protecting yourself and your family from illness and to learn more about safely cleaning reptile habitats, please visit

<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/SalmonellaFrogTurtle/>

