



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

The Trouble with Turtles

Multistate Outbreak of Human Salmonella Infections Associated with Exposure to Turtles — United States, 2007–2008

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[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC — safer, healthier people.

[Dr. Shaw] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm Dr. Frederic Shaw, Editor of the MMWR, and I'm your host for this week.

Sometimes, small turtles — meaning those with shells of 4 inches long or less — still turn up as household pets in the United States, despite longstanding federal regulations restricting their sale. Turtles and other reptiles are a known source of Salmonella, which can cause serious illness with diarrhea, fever, and vomiting. Children can handle these little turtles easily, and the turtles may seem harmless, but children and others who come into contact with them can catch Salmonella infection. CDC is focusing more attention on turtles as a result of a recent multistate outbreak of Salmonella infection. Dr. Mark Sotir is a researcher with CDC's Infection Prevention Program. He's joining us today to discuss this outbreak and steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of Salmonella infection. Welcome to the show, Mark.

[Dr. Sotir] Thank you. Glad to be here.

[Dr. Shaw] Mark, how did CDC first learn about this outbreak?

[Dr. Sotir] The North Carolina Department of Health first notified CDC of the outbreak in early October. They were investigating illnesses in two girls who got sick on the same day after swimming together in a backyard pool. Several other states also reported sick persons with the same type of Salmonella.

[Dr. Shaw] Mark, who got sick in this outbreak?

[Dr. Sotir] More than 100 persons in 33 states were reported to CDC with these illnesses. The majority of the sick persons were young children; however, there were illnesses in all age groups. Many more persons who got sick were likely not reported to CDC.

[Dr. Shaw] What was the cause of the illness?

[Dr. Sotir] The cause of the illnesses was a bacteria called Salmonella, and state and local health departments interviewed persons to find out what actually infected people with the Salmonella and found evidence that turtles carrying Salmonella were the source of many of the illnesses.

[Dr. Shaw] So does everybody who has any contact with turtles get sick?

[Dr. Sotir] No, not everybody gets sick, but everybody is at risk of getting sick. All reptiles, including turtles, carry Salmonella bacteria, and you don't have to touch the turtle to get sick because Salmonella can be present on surfaces that come in contact with the turtles.

[Dr. Shaw] You know, what about turtles in the wild? I remember, when I was a kid, we often found them in ponds. Is there a risk for Salmonella from wild turtles too?

[Dr. Sotir] Yeah there is. Again, all reptiles, including turtles, carry Salmonella bacteria. The best way to avoid getting sick is to not have contact with reptiles, specifically turtles. And if someone does have contact with a turtle or its environment, they should wash their hands immediately with soap and water.

[Dr. Shaw] You know, it's my understanding that there are some regulations that prohibit the sale of small turtles, under most circumstances, so how do people get hold of turtles?

[Dr. Sotir] Well, there are some exceptions in the law, such as the sale of turtles for educational purposes, and enforcement of the law has proven difficult. However, the law is clear in that small turtles are not to be sold or distributed as pets in the United States. CDC specifically recommends that all reptiles, including turtles, be kept out of households with children less than five years old.

[Dr. Shaw] So, if you have a child who has friends who have turtles or goes to school where there are turtles kept, what can you do to protect and educate the children?

[Dr. Sotir] Yeah, again, small children are at particular risk 'cause they're likely to handle the turtles as pets. I would educate them to avoid touching or handling the turtles or their habitats and, again, to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water if exposed to the turtles or their environment.

[Dr. Shaw] Mark, where can our listeners get more information about this type of infection and the problem of keeping reptiles, like turtles, as pets?

[Dr. Sotir] Listeners can get more information at CDC's website: www.cdc.gov/healthypets, where they'll find a link to "Spotlight on Turtles."

[Dr. Shaw] Mark, thanks very much for sharing this information with us today.

[Dr. Shaw] That's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Dr. Frederic Shaw for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

[Announcer] To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family and your community, please visit www.cdc.gov.