



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

The Trouble with Turtles

Multistate Outbreak of Human Salmonella Typhimurium Infections Associated with Pet Turtle Exposure — United States, 2008

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

[Dr. Gaynes] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly feature of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Dr. Robert Gaynes.

Owning a pet can be fun and educational for children, but certain animals can cause illness. A recent CDC report documented a large *Salmonella* outbreak associated with small pet turtles.

Dr. Karen Neil is an EIS officer with CDC's National Center for Zoonotic, Vector-Borne, and Enteric Diseases. She's joining us today to discuss safety precautions for people who have pet turtles and other reptiles. Welcome to the show, Karen.

[Dr. Neil] Thank you for having me, Bob.

[Dr. Gaynes] Karen, what kinds of pets are more likely to cause illness in their owners than, say, other pets?

[Dr. Neil] There are a few types of pets that are more likely cause illness in their owners. The first are reptiles, such as turtles, iguanas, snakes. For example, in our outbreak, small turtles were associated with *Salmonella* infection, and these are turtles that are less than four inches long. Other animals include frogs and birds, particularly baby chicks.

[Dr. Gaynes] Can you tell if a pet is infected with *Salmonella*?

[Dr. Neil] No, not at all. Most of the pets look completely healthy.

[Dr. Gaynes] So how is *Salmonella* transmitted from pets to people?

[Dr. Neil] There are several ways. The first is direct contact – touching the pet. However, it's really important to know that you actually do not have to touch the pet to get sick with *Salmonella*. Because the pets, like turtles, can shed *Salmonella*, they can contaminate anything in their environment around them, and that includes turtle water, their habitats, or any surfaces that they come into contact with. So you should treat all pets and things that they touch as potentially infected with *Salmonella*.

[Dr. Gaynes] What are the symptoms of *Salmonella* infection in people?

[Dr. Neil] People usually will have fever, stomach pain, and diarrhea that begins about 12 to 72 hours after they become infected.

[Dr. Gaynes] Karen, are there families who simply shouldn't have turtles or other reptiles as pets?

[Dr. Neil] First, households with children under five should not have turtles or other reptiles. Also, any households with elderly individuals or anybody who has a weakened immune system that might put them at increased risk for infection should not have turtles or other reptiles. And while these aren't technically families, I do want to say that turtles and reptiles should not be in daycare centers or schools because there's an increased chance that children may be exposed to them there, as well.

[Dr. Gaynes] What are some precautions that pet owners should take when caring for their pet turtles or other reptiles?

[Dr. Neil] First, they should treat every turtle or reptile as potentially infected with *Salmonella*, and that means that they should wash their hands immediately after touching the reptile or after coming into contact with anything that the turtle or reptile has touched. Turtles and reptiles should be kept away from food preparation areas or anywhere that food is served because of the risk of contaminating those areas. This also includes that people should not wash the container that the turtle is in in the kitchen sink. They should wash that outside and they should immediately disinfect any surfaces that the animal or the animal's environment has come into contact with, such as their water or the cage.

[Dr. Gaynes] Where can listeners get more information about pet safety?

[Dr. Neil] They can go to the CDC website at www.cdc.gov and type in "turtles as pets" in the search box.

[Dr. Gaynes] Thanks, Karen. I've been talking today with CDC's Dr. Karen Neil about how to safely own and raise pet turtles and other reptiles.

Remember, turtles and other reptiles can cause *Salmonella* infections in people, even if the animal looks healthy. After touching or cleaning a pet's habitat, hands, sinks, and other surfaces that came in contact with the animal need to be thoroughly disinfected.

Until next time, be well. This is Dr. Robert Gaynes for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.