

Protect Yourself From Salmonella: Be Smart When Handling Pets

(NAPSA)—Snakes, lizards and tortoises. They have become increasingly popular pets, but owners of these and other reptiles must take precautions because they can harbor Salmonella—potentially dangerous bacteria that can cause severe illness in humans.

“An estimated 70,000 people get Salmonella from contact with reptiles in the United States each year,” said Richard J. Baltaro, M.D., Ph.D., FCAP, a pathologist and associate professor of pathology at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb. “If you have a reptile as a pet you have to be extremely cautious when dealing with it.”

Dr. Baltaro is a pathologist—a physician who treats patients with illnesses such as Salmonella through laboratory medicine. Dr. Baltaro received a Ph.D. in microbiology while studying the DNA antibiotic resistance in Salmonella bacteria.

In addition to reptiles, other animals such as baby chicks and ducklings can carry Salmonella. “Pocket pets” including rats, mice, rabbits, gerbils, hamsters, guinea pigs and ferrets, as well as rodents that are bought to feed other animals (such as snakes), can also carry potentially dangerous bacteria. Salmonella, which usually lives in the intestinal tracts of humans and other animals, can be transmitted to people who accidentally eat food contaminated with animal feces or who fail to wash hands after touching the feces of their pets. To help prevent infections, anyone owning, buying or handling these animals should take the following precautions:

- Buy animals that look lively and alert and that have glossy coats that are free of droppings.
- Don’t purchase a pet that shares a cage with other animals that have diarrhea or look sick.
- Always wash hands thoroughly after cleaning up pets’ droppings.
- Ensure that children wash their hands immediately after



Handle pets safely:
Wash your hands
to prevent illness.



handling rodents or their feces.

- Supervise young children if they clean the pet’s cage.
- Don’t smoke or eat food while handling your pet.
- Don’t handle pets in areas where food is prepared.
- Don’t kiss your pet or hold it close to your mouth.

“If you touch reptiles or one of these other animals, wash your hands because it helps to prevent you from contracting viruses or bacteria your pet may carry,” Dr. Baltaro said. “If your pet dies soon after you buy it, it may have been ill with a disease that could make people sick. Inform the pet store about the animal’s death, and clean and disinfect the cage before using it again.”

Symptoms of the Salmonella infection include: nausea, abdominal cramping, vomiting, fever, headache, chills, sweats, fatigue, bloody diarrhea with mucus and lack of appetite. Symptoms occur typically between six and 72 hours after contact with the bacteria.

There is no real cure for a Salmonella infection—only treatment of the symptoms. Infected individuals should seek medical care for diarrhea, extreme dehydration or other serious symptoms. If the infection is severe, patients may be given an antibiotic. But the best way to protect yourself from Salmonella is to wash hands whenever dealing with your pets.

For more information about how to prevent disease, visit the College of American Pathologists at www.cap.org.