How To Keep From Catching Anything But Love From Your Pets

(NAPS)—While pets provide many benefits, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, some animals can also pass diseases to people. Such diseases are known as zoonoses. Here, Dr. Calum Macpherson, Dean and Director of Research at St. George's University's School of Medicine and School of Veterinary Medicine, who helped write a book called "Dogs, Zoonoses and Public Health," offers a look at a few common problems and how to avoid them.

Cats: Cat-related diseases that make people sick include cat scratch fever and plague, but those are rare. Toxoplasmosis can come from cats, particularly if you clean the litter box or do gardening where cats roam, and cats can carry rabies, a deadly viral disease.

Dogs: Dogs can carry a variety of germs that can make people sick. For example, puppies may pass the bacterium Campylobacter in their feces. This germ can cause diarrhea in people. Dogs may carry a variety of parasites that can cause rashes or illness in people. Dogs may also carry the bacterium Leptospira and rabies, though rabies from dogs is rare in the United States.

Birds: Different types of birds can carry different diseases. For example, baby chicks and ducklings often carry Salmonella. Parakeets and parrots can carry Chlamydia psittaci. Pigeon droppings can have other germs that make people sick.

Reptiles: An estimated 3 percent of households in the United States include at least one reptile, including turtles, lizards and snakes. One of the most serious conditions you can get from these pets is salmonellosis. An estimated 70,000 people get salmonellosis from contact with reptiles in the United States each year.

Pocket Pets: Rabbits and rodents such as rats, mice and hamsters, like reptiles, may spread Salmonella to people. When choosing a pocket pet, don't pick one that is tired, has diarrhea or looks sickly. The pet should be lively and alert, with a glossy coat free of droppings. The animal's breathing should be normal. There should be no discharge from the eyes or nose.

Having a loving pet is good for your health but you have to take a few precautions, especially washing your hands thoroughly after handling any animal, experts say.

Whatever the pet, whether someone gets sick can depend on two things: susceptibility and prevention.

Susceptibility

In general, healthy pets make healthy people, but there are those who are more likely than others to get diseases from pets. These include infants, children younger than 5 years old, organ transplant patients, people with HIV/AIDS, and people being treated for cancer.

Prevention

To protect yourself from pet-related diseases, Dr. Macpherson offers this advice:

• Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and running water after touching pets, their bedding, their saliva or their feces.

• Try to avoid scratches and bites. If you are scratched or bitten, wash the area with soap and running water right away and get medical advice.

• Remember to have your pet checked out, treated for worms and vaccinated by your veterinarian. Zoonoses are preventable, so keep yourself and your pet healthy.

• Do not eat or smoke while handling your pet.

• Do not kiss your pet or hold it close to your mouth.

• See that your pets are up to date in all their vaccinations, especially rabies.

You can find more helpful advice from Dr. Macpherson and other experts at St. George's University, a premier center of international education on the island of Grenada.

Its Schools of Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, Nursing, Public Health and Preventive Medicine, along with the Windward Islands Research & Education Foundation, work together to provide a mixture of expertise and environment for the concept of "One Health, One Medicine" to flourish and to take students from residency to fellowship training to employment. The university aims to prepare its students for global health care and is affiliated with educational institutions worldwide.

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