

Salmonella and Pet Reptiles

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Salmonellosis is a disease caused by a group of bacteria that can produce illness in all animals and people. Those most at risk are the very young, very old, and the immune compromised. People can get Salmonella from many sources and there are hundreds of thousands of reports every year. Most of these infections are caused by ingesting uncooked or partially cooked eggs, chicken, or other meats. Recently, iguanas have been reported as an increasingly frequent cause. According to the Center for Disease Control reptiles accounted for an estimated 2 - 5% of the over one million cases in 1993. That is at least 20,000 cases, which is definitely cause for concern. Most of these cases would have been prevented with a few simple guidelines (see below).

One of the greatest problems with Salmonella infections is that an animal carrying the bacteria may not show any signs of the disease at all. This situation may occur with reptiles. Iguanas and other reptiles typically do not show signs of the disease. Some iguanas carry Salmonella in their feces, with estimates ranging from 36-77% incidence. In the 1970's turtles under 4 inches in length were banned by FDA from sale because many carried Salmonella (and less than 4 inches meant kids could put them in their mouths). In the process of handling these animals, cleaning their food dishes, or cleaning their cage, fecal material (even in small amounts) may be transferred to human hands, or the mouth, resulting in a human infection.

Symptoms of salmonellosis in people vary widely. There may be mild abdominal pain, nausea or cramps, or more severe signs such as diarrhea, vomiting and fever. Occasionally the symptoms can be very serious, including meningitis, especially in very young children. It is much better to prevent infection in people, than to prevent and control infection in reptiles. Animals should only be purchased from reputable sources and all animals should be quarantined until they can be checked by a veterinarian. Salmonella is difficult to culture, even with repeated fecal tests. It would be safest to just assume that most reptiles have Salmonella and to always practice good hygiene with all reptile species. Handlers and owners of reptiles should follow some basic rules (see following).

Hygiene Guidelines for Reptile Owners

1. Always wash hands with hot, soapy water after handling any reptile, and its cage or accessories.
2. Always supervise children handling reptiles. Make sure they wash hands properly after handling. Do not allow them to put any reptile in or around their mouth.
3. Maintain reptiles in areas away from food preparation, serving areas, and young children's rooms.
4. Never use a kitchen sink to wash reptiles, cages or dishes. Excess food or cage substrate should be thrown in the garbage or flushed down the toilet.
5. Always wear gloves when cleaning reptile cages and always use a disinfectant for cleaning.
6. Keep other pets away from reptile cages.
7. Never kiss a reptile. Never eat, drink or smoke when handling a reptile.
8. Use special caution with reptiles around infants and individuals who may be immune-compromised.
9. Always feed a high quality, clean, and uncontaminated food source to reptiles. Maintain reptiles in a clean, safe and comfortable environment.
10. Have reptiles frequently examined by a veterinarian.