



Reducing the risks of salmonella infection from reptiles

Introduction

Most reptiles, including those kept as pets, carry salmonella in their gut without showing any signs of infection. Salmonella can pass from reptiles to people and cause infection. Salmonella infection can have serious consequences, particularly for babies and small children, and can be fatal.



This factsheet describes the potential risks of infection with salmonella from a pet reptile and how these risks can be avoided. Following this advice will help to prevent serious illness and possible deaths from salmonella infection caught from reptiles.

Salmonella infection

Salmonella are bacteria found in the gut of many animals, including reptiles. The bacteria can spread from the animals to cause illness in people. Though salmonella infection in people usually causes a mild illness with fever, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhoea, more severe illness can occur. Babies and young children are more likely to develop serious illness, which can be fatal.

People can also acquire salmonella infection from other sources, including: eating and handling raw or undercooked meat, products containing raw egg or unwashed fruit and vegetables; drinking unpasteurised milk or milk products; contact with infected animals, the droppings of infected animals, or contaminated soil.

Salmonella can be passed from reptiles to people

Most reptiles carry salmonella in their gut and shed the bacteria in their droppings. These droppings can quickly spread over the reptile's skin, and any surface or object that the reptile comes into contact with can be contaminated with salmonella, including cages, toys, clothes, furniture and household surfaces.

All reptiles should be presumed to carry salmonella in their gut, even if they do not show any signs of infection.

Salmonella can pass from reptiles to people when people put anything in their mouth that has come into contact with their reptile – particularly their fingers.

Some reptile foods such as frozen or defrosted mice, rats and chicks can also contain salmonella and be a potential source of infection for both the reptile and its owners.

Hands can become contaminated when someone handles:

- a reptile
- reptile cages or equipment
- raw reptile feed, including frozen or defrosted mice, rats and chicks

Food can become contaminated when it is:

- handled after someone has touched a reptile and not washed their hands
- put on surfaces that the reptiles have been in contact with
- shared with a reptile.

Objects can become contaminated by contact with:

- the reptile or its droppings
- contaminated hands or food

People most at risk of salmonella infection from reptiles

Babies, children under five, pregnant women, the elderly and those with weaker immune systems are particularly at risk from infection.

Children are particularly at risk because they like to handle and stroke pet reptiles. As a result, their hands and fingers can become contaminated.

Babies and small children may be infected by parents and other family members who have handled a reptile and then not washed their hands before feeding or touching the child. They may also become infected from reptile droppings if the reptile is free to roam the home.



If you or other family members become ill with symptoms such as fever, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhoea, consult your doctor and inform the doctor that you own/keep a reptile.

Good care of your reptile will reduce the risks of salmonella infection. It is not possible to eliminate salmonella from reptiles. Therefore antibiotic treatment of reptiles suspected to be carrying salmonella is not recommended.

Reducing the risk

You can reduce the risk of catching salmonella infection from a reptile:

- always supervise children to ensure they do not put your reptile, (or objects that the reptile has been in contact with) near their mouths
- ensure children wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately after handling your reptile
- keep your reptile out of rooms where food is prepared and eaten, and limit the parts of the house where your reptile is allowed to roam freely
- always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately after handling your reptile, their cage or any other equipment such as soaking pools
- always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately after feeding your reptile, and after handling raw (frozen or defrosted) mice, rats or chicks. Ensure that all surfaces that have come into contact with the defrosting food are cleaned thoroughly afterwards
- do not eat, drink or smoke while handling your reptile
- do not kiss your reptile
- do not use kitchen sinks to bathe your reptile or to wash their cage or equipment. If you use a bathroom sink or bathtub, it must be cleaned thoroughly with disinfectant afterwards
- dispose of waste water and droppings from your reptile down the toilet instead of a sink or bathtub

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