

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## Salmonellosis from Pet Reptiles and Amphibians

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### What is salmonellosis from reptiles?

Reptiles (lizards, snakes, and turtles) and amphibians (frogs, toads and salamanders) can carry infectious bacteria (germs) called *Salmonella*. Salmonellosis is the disease caused by these bacteria. These same bacteria can also be found in uncooked foods like eggs, meat, and chicken or turkey.

### What are the symptoms of salmonellosis in people?

The most common symptoms are stomach cramps, diarrhea, fever, nausea, and sometimes vomiting. Symptoms most often begin 12 to 72 hours after the germs are swallowed. Symptoms usually last for several days. Some people with salmonellosis become sick enough to require hospitalization.

### Who is at risk?

Salmonellosis can be very dangerous for infants, children, pregnant women, and the elderly. This disease is also dangerous for people who cannot fight these bacteria because they have a weakened immune system from HIV/AIDS, cancer or cancer chemotherapy, treatment with steroids, organ transplant, kidney failure, chronic liver problems, or other diseases.

### Will my pet reptile or amphibian have any symptoms?

Not usually. Salmonellosis does not usually make reptiles or amphibians sick. They can have these bacteria in their bodies and not have diarrhea or any other problems; however, they can still shed (pass) the bacteria in their feces (stool).

### How can I get *Salmonella* from my pet reptile or amphibian?

Any animal or human with *Salmonella* sheds the bacteria in their feces. Since most reptiles and amphibians are kept in a confined space such as a cage or aquarium, they are likely to get feces on their feet and skin. They then spread the feces around the entire cage. This is especially true when animals are kept in water.

If you touch your pets or clean the cages, you may get the bacteria on your hands. If you touch your hands to your face or mouth when eating, smoking, scratching, or biting your nails before you have thoroughly washed your hands, you may accidentally spread the bacteria to your mouth. Touching food may also spread the bacteria from a person's hands to his or her mouth. Once the bacteria reach your mouth and you swallow, you have been exposed to the germ and can get sick.

Sometimes, *Salmonella* may even be in the food you feed your reptile or amphibian. This is most common in the fresh or frozen rodents that you use to feed some reptiles. It is important to wash your hands after feeding your pet, even if you haven't touched your pet directly.

An infected person can also spread the bacteria to other people through his or her own feces.

## How can salmonellosis be prevented?

- **Always wash your hands with soap and water immediately after handling pet reptiles or amphibians, their cage, food, dishes or toys, or their droppings;** use waterless alcohol-based gels or hand rubs when soap is not available.
- Clean pet cages regularly and remove soiled items from the cage between cleanings.
- Clean the cage in a well-ventilated area or outside. Do not clean it in the kitchen sink or anywhere else food is stored or handled. Do not bathe or swim your pet in household sinks or tubs.
- Do not allow your pet to walk around on the kitchen counter, tables or any other place used for eating or making food.
- Do not kiss pet reptiles or amphibians or hold them close to your face.
- Have your pet seen regularly by your veterinarian and contact your veterinarian if your pet shows signs of illness between visits.
- Do not allow pet reptiles or amphibians to come into contact with wild animals or their droppings.
- Reptiles and amphibians are not appropriate pets for every home. Because pregnant women, person with weakened immune systems, the elderly and young children (less than 5 years old) are at higher risk for more serious illness, these pets should only be handled and cared for by an adult who is not pregnant and/or living with a weakened immune system.

## Can salmonellosis be treated?

Most people who get salmonellosis do not require treatment other than oral fluids. Some people with severe diarrhea may require intravenous fluids. Antibiotics are not usually given to people unless the infection spreads from their intestines to other organs. If you think you might have salmonellosis, you should see your doctor or go to your health center. People with diarrhea or vomiting need extra fluids.

Reptiles and amphibians are not usually treated with antibiotics for *Salmonella* since it does not normally make them sick.

## Where can I get more information?

- Salmonellosis in humans: call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology (617) 983-6800 or toll free at 888-658-2850 or visit the MDPH website at [www.mass.gov/dph/epi](http://www.mass.gov/dph/epi)
- Salmonellosis in animals: call the Department of Agricultural Resources, Division of Animal Health (617) 626-1795 or visit their website at <http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/agr/animal-health>
- Your local board of health, listed in the phone book under government.
- Your doctor or health care provider.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), <http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/animals/reptiles.htm>

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