

# Protecting Yourself from Salmonella

By Susan Tellem

When Peter bought a quarter-size green turtle from a Los Angeles street vendor for his young son Danny, he had no idea he was bringing home a tiny package of life that packed a big wallop of a disease. Within days, Danny ended up in the ICU with severe vomiting, lethargy and fever. He almost died from salmonella infection.



In Texas, an HIV-positive, 45-year-old pet store employee who routinely handled reptiles was treated for severe salmonella sepsis (a serious illness that results when salmonella enters the bloodstream).

All over America, men and women, adults and kids are unknowingly trading and buying reptiles infected with salmonella. Reptiles like water turtles are often purchased at pet stores and swap meets, as well as from the black market and private reptile breeders. Many reptile sellers do not post warnings about the dangers of salmonella, even though state and federal laws require it.

## What is salmonella?

According to the New York Department of Health, salmonella is “a bacterial infection that generally infects the intestinal tract and occasionally the bloodstream. Symptoms include mild to severe diarrhea, fever and occasionally vomiting. Symptoms generally appear one to three days after exposure. It is spread by eating or drinking contaminated food or by contact with infected people, animals and reptiles.”

There is no known effective treatment for salmonella in the turtle. Even if you treat the salmonella in your pet, it returns. Most healthy adults show no symptoms of salmonella even if they are infected. But, children under five, pregnant women, the elderly, and those whose immune systems are compromised (e.g., people who have AIDS, who have had kidney transplants or who are undergoing chemotherapy) are at risk of serious illness or even death from salmonella infection.

## How pervasive is the problem?

During the 1970s, millions of tiny baby turtles were sold throughout the United States as pets. By the mid-70s, a quarter of a million children and infants were diagnosed with turtle-associated salmonella. In 1975, the Food and Drug Administration, in an effort to stop the problem, prohibited the sale of any turtles under four inches in length. This law still stands but is poorly enforced. Unsupervised children are frequently at risk with these small turtles because they can easily put them in their mouths.

This craze has started again. Tiny turtles called red-eared sliders are being sold by vendors on street corners, in shopping malls, in front of museums and even at pet stores.

The turtles, imported from Mexico or harvested in Louisiana, are often infected with salmonella. Black market vendors never issue a health warning with the sale of the turtles.

### **How can I protect myself?**

According to national reptile specialist Walter Rosskopf, DVM, who runs the Avian and Exotic Animal Hospital in Hawthorne, California: "Reptiles can be kept by responsible people who take strict precautions." He is opposed to children having reptiles because of the health hazards. Because of the danger that salmonella poses to children, it is inappropriate for teachers to have reptiles (and other animals, such as chicks, which also carry salmonella) in the classroom.

Says Dr. Rosskopf, "Salmonella, in my experience, is seen most commonly in water turtles, boa constrictors and iguanas. The infected reptile frequently shows no symptoms." Here's Dr. Rosskopf's advice for those who currently have reptiles as pets or plan to get one:

- Wash your hands with hot, soapy water (preferably antibacterial soap) after handling the pet, the cage or cage accessories.
- Wear gloves and face protection when cleaning a cage or changing the water in a tank, pool or pond.
- Always supervise and minimize a child's handling of a reptile.
- House reptiles away from the kitchen, dining room and food-preparation areas.
- Keep other pets away from the reptiles themselves, their cages and their water bowls.
- Make regular visits to your reptile veterinarian and have laboratory-screening tests done.
- Do not use the bathroom sink or shower as a reptile-soaking area.
- Do not eat, drink or smoke while handling the reptile or cleaning his/her environment.
- If your reptile injures you, clean the wound thoroughly and consult a physician. Reptile injuries can easily become infected.

Finally, although it might be tempting, Dr. Rosskopf also warns, "Do not kiss your reptile!"

### **Where can I get more information?**

Visit this page on the Centers for Disease Control website:

[www.cdc.gov/healthypets/animals/reptiles.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/animals/reptiles.htm)

You can also get more information from American Tortoise Rescue by calling 800-938-3553 or sending an e-mail to [info@tortoise.com](mailto:info@tortoise.com).

*Susan Tellem is a co-founder of American Tortoise Rescue ([www.tortoise.com](http://www.tortoise.com)), a non-profit that rescues, rehabilitates, adopts, and protects all species of tortoise and turtle.*