



Public Health

Seattle & King County

HEALTHY PEOPLE. HEALTHY COMMUNITIES.

Alonzo L. Plough, Ph.D., MPH, Director and Health Officer

MEMORANDUM

Date: June 3, 2004

To: King County Child Care Center Owners, Directors and Staff

From: Jeffrey S. Duchin, MD, Chief
Communicable Disease Control, Epidemiology and Immunization Section;
Sharon G. Hopkins, DVM, MPH; Public Health Veterinarian
Environmental Health Services; and
Pamela Boring, Personal Health Services Supervisor
Child Care Health Program

Subject: Risk of Salmonellosis Associated with Reptiles and Amphibians:
Recommendations from Public Health - Seattle & King County

In 2003, the Washington Administrative Code (WAC Chapter 388-150) on Minimum Licensing Standards for Child Care Centers was revised. Although the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Public Health - Seattle & King County (Public Health) recommend prohibiting reptiles and amphibians in child care centers to protect the health and interests of the public, particularly young children, WAC (Chapter 388-295) continues to allow reptiles and amphibians in child care centers with specific restrictions, as listed in the WAC.

Salmonellosis is an infection caused by bacteria called *Salmonella* causing diarrhea, stomach cramps, fever, and dehydration. More serious illness and complications are seen primarily among infants, the elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems and include infections of the blood stream, central nervous system, and bones and joints. Pet reptiles and amphibians are a recognized source of salmonellosis for young children. *Salmonella* survives well in the environment and can be isolated for prolonged periods from contaminated surfaces. For this reason, indirect contact with reptiles and amphibians through contact with contaminated surfaces can cause illness, particularly in infants and young children.

Because of the risk for serious infection in young children, reptiles should not be brought to child care centers for special events. The CDC and Public Health also recommend that reptiles and amphibians be kept out of households that include children less than 5 years of age or persons with weakened immune systems. If you currently have reptiles (e.g., snakes, lizards, iguanas, geckos, turtles, tortoises) or amphibians (e.g., frogs, toads, newts, salamanders) in your child care facility, we recommend you remove them as soon as possible to prevent transmission of *Salmonella* to children in your program.

Young children can learn about reptiles and amphibians by visiting zoos and aquariums, and through educational materials including books, models and videos. With strict attention to hand washing and following measures to avoid contamination of the environment, older children and adults can handle such animals outside of child care settings with less risk of becoming infected with and transmitting *Salmonella*.

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Parents of infants and young children, including those who own reptiles and amphibians, are often unaware of the risk of salmonellosis associated with even indirect exposure to reptiles or amphibians. Indirect contact occurs through touching contaminated surfaces or equipment, or by living, playing or crawling in a household or facility where reptiles or amphibians are kept or have roamed.

When parents of infants and young children learn of the risk of *Salmonella* infection with even indirect contact with reptiles and amphibians and the potential for serious complications including meningitis, bloodstream infections, severe dehydration, hospitalization, and death, they are often quite concerned. Even though the WAC does not prohibit reptiles and amphibians in child care centers, child care operators who allow young children to have direct or indirect contact with these animals in their center may be held accountable by parents of children infected with *Salmonella*.

If Public Health identifies a case of salmonellosis in a child linked to reptiles and amphibians in a child care center in King County, we will:

- Require immediate removal of the reptile or amphibian.
- Conduct a thorough investigation to identify other infected children and staff at the program.
- Educate the parents or guardians of the infected child regarding the increased risks of salmonellosis associated with contact with reptiles and amphibians, the increased severity of illness among infected children, and the recommendations issued by the CDC and Public Health to prevent transmission of *Salmonella* infections in child care centers.

To have any animal at the Child Care center, the WAC requires that the center:

- **Notify the parents in writing that animals are on the premises and the potential health risks associated with the animals** to include how to address the needs of the children having allergies to the animals.
- **Have a signed document from each parent stating they understand the potential health risks posed by the animal.** If you allow reptiles or amphibians at your center, whether for a special event or for an extended time period, Public Health recommends you give each parent a copy of this document and the Public Health fact sheet--*Salmonellosis – Reptiles and Amphibians*, available online at www.metrokc.gov/health/, select “Communicable Diseases A-Z”--to inform parents of the potential risks posed by reptiles and amphibians.
- **Reptiles and amphibians must be in an aquarium or other totally self-contained area** except during educational activities involving the reptile or amphibian. Children five years of age or less must not physically handle reptiles and amphibians.

The entire section on animals in the WAC on Minimum Licensing Requirements for Child Care Centers is WAC 388-295-5170¹--*Can We Have Animals at the Center?*--and includes other requirements for allowing pets in child care centers. We welcome the opportunity to share more detailed information with you on the risks reptiles and amphibians pose for young children and persons with weakened immune systems. To discuss these issues, call the Communicable Disease Control, Epidemiology and Immunization Section at (206) 296-4774, Dr. Hopkins at (206) 263-8454, or your Child Care Health Program Public Health Nurse at (206) 296-2770.

¹ <http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/esa/dcccl/policy.shtml>