

## Advice for Consumers

- Don't buy small turtles for pets or as gifts.
- If your family is expecting a child, remove any pet turtle (or other reptile or amphibian) from the home before the infant arrives.
- Keep turtles out of homes with children under 5 years old, the elderly, or people with weakened immune systems.
- Do not allow turtles to roam freely through the house, especially in food preparation areas.
- Do not clean turtle tanks or other supplies in the kitchen sink. Disinfect a tub or other place where turtle habitats are cleaned.
- Always wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after touching any turtles, their housing, or anything (for example, food) that comes in contact with a turtle or its housing.
- Be aware that *Salmonella* infection can be caused by contact with turtles in petting zoos, parks, child day care facilities, or other locations.

- Watch for symptoms of *Salmonella* infection, such as diarrhea, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, fever, and headache. Call your doctor if you suspect that you or a member of your family may have *Salmonella*.

## For More Information

Turtle information for consumers, regulators and Public Health Educators

[www.fda.gov/cvm/turtles.htm](http://www.fda.gov/cvm/turtles.htm)

Or call 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332)



Photo credit: CDC

## Pet Turtles: A Common Source of *Salmonella*



U.S. Department of Health and  
Human Services



Food and Drug Administration

## Pet Turtles

The little glassy-eyed creatures may look cute and harmless, but small turtles can make people very ill. Turtles commonly carry bacteria called *Salmonella* on their outer skin and shell surfaces. People can get *Salmonella* by coming in contact with turtles or their habitats.

*Salmonella* can cause a serious or even life-threatening infection in people, even though the bacteria do not make turtles sick. People infected with *Salmonella* may have diarrhea, fever, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, and headache. Symptoms usually appear six to 72 hours after contact with the bacteria and last about two to seven days. Most people recover without treatment, but some get so sick that they need to be treated in a hospital.

## Who Is at Risk?

Anyone can get *Salmonella* infection, but the risk is highest in

- infants
- young children
- elderly people
- people with lowered natural resistance to infection due to pregnancy, cancer, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and other diseases

"All reptiles (turtles, lizards, snakes) and amphibians (frogs, salamanders), are commonly contaminated with *Salmonella*,"

says Joseph C. Paige, DVM, a Consumer Safety Officer in the FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine. "But it is the small turtles that most often are put in contact with young children, where consequences of infection are likely to be severe." Because of this health risk, since 1975, FDA has banned the sale of small turtles with a shell less than four inches long.

"Young children are ingenious in constructing ways to infect themselves," says Paige. "They put the small turtles in their mouths or, more often, they touch the turtles or dangle their fingers in the turtle tank water and then put their hands in their mouths. Also, sometimes the tanks and reptile paraphernalia are cleaned in the kitchen sink, and food and eating utensils get cross-contaminated."

Surfaces such as countertops, tabletops, bare floors, and carpeting can also become contaminated with the bacteria if the turtle is allowed to roam on them. The bacteria may survive for a long period of time on these surfaces.

## Turtle-Associated *Salmonella* Infections

Despite the ban on selling turtles with a shell less than 4 inches, some pet shops, flea markets,



Street vendors, and online stores continue to sell small turtles, sometimes with devastating consequences. An example is the 2007 death of a four-week-old baby in Florida linked to *Salmonella* from a small turtle. The DNA of the *Salmonella* from the turtle matched that from the infant.

From May 1, 2007, to January 18, 2008, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) received reports of *Salmonella* infection in 103 people—most of them children—in 33 states. Fortunately, there were no deaths. However, 24 people were so sick that they landed in the hospital. The investigation showed that most of the sick people were exposed to a turtle (touching, feeding, cleaning habitat, changing water) shortly before they got sick. Two teenaged girls who became ill had been swimming in an unchlorinated, in-ground pool where the family's pet turtles had also been allowed to swim.