

FDA Acts to Reduce Risk of *Salmonella* Infections



Clockwise from top: FDA Office of Criminal Investigations badge; turtle with a shell less than 4 inches long; *Salmonella* bacteria

All reptiles—including turtles—are commonly contaminated with *Salmonella*, a bacteria that poses a significant health risk to humans.

Turtle and *Salmonella* Photos: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

What do 1,000 yellow-bellied sliders and Mississippi map turtles have to do with public health?

These turtles can make people very sick.

On March 3, 2008, Strictly Reptiles Inc., a wildlife dealer in Hollywood, Fla., sold 1,000 baby yellow-bellied sliders and Mississippi map turtles to a souvenir shop in Panama City, Fla. The sale violated a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) ban on small pet turtles designed to protect the public from the disease-causing bacteria *Salmonella*. Turtles often carry *Salmonella* on their outer skin and shell surfaces, and people can get *Salmonella* infection by coming in contact with turtles or their habitats.

On July 14, 2008, the U.S. District Court in Fort Lauderdale convicted and sentenced Strictly Reptiles for its role in illegally selling, and offering for sale, live undersized turtles. The Florida District of FDA's law enforcement arm, the Office of Criminal Investigations (OCI), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service investigated the case leading to the conviction, with help from FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine.

"The illegal sale of these pet turtles put one of our most vulnerable populations—children—at risk for becoming very sick," says Philip Walsky, assistant special agent in charge in FDA's OCI Headquarters office.

Don't buy small turtles for pets or as gifts.

Salmonella Infection Can Cause Illness

All reptiles (turtles, lizards, snakes) and amphibians (frogs, salamanders) are commonly contaminated with *Salmonella*. The bacteria do not make these animals sick, but they can make people ill and even be life-threatening to children, elderly people, and others with weakened immune systems.

Small pet turtles are of particular concern because children are more prone to handling the turtles without washing their hands afterwards, and even putting the turtles in their mouths.

In 1975, FDA banned the sale of small pet turtles—those with shells less than four inches long. Infectious disease specialists estimate that banning small turtles prevents 100,000 *Salmonella* infections in children each year in the United States. The ban excludes small turtles when they are used for educational, exhibitional, or scientific purposes—not as pets.

Despite the ban, in recent years, several widespread outbreaks of *Salmonella* infection related to undersized turtles have been reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

In 2007, two teenaged girls in South Carolina became very ill with bloody diarrhea, cramps, fever, and vomiting after they swam in an unchlorinated, in-ground pool where the family's pet turtles had also been allowed to swim. The same strain of *Salmonella* found in the teenaged girls was also found in 101 other people in 32 states who were reported ill between early May 2007 and mid-January 2008, according to CDC. When 80 of these people were questioned, 47 of them confirmed that they had been exposed to a turtle during the seven days before they got sick.

In February 2007, the tragic death of a four-week-old baby in Florida was linked to *Salmonella* from a small pet turtle.

Criminal Conviction

The owner of Strictly Reptiles admitted to OCI agents that he intentionally did not ask customers their purpose for purchasing the turtles in order not to lose sales.

On March 3, 2008, Strictly Reptiles sold about 1,000 undersized turtles to a souvenir business for \$2.75 to \$3.00 each. The souvenir business, in turn, sold the undersized turtles for \$14.99 each.

At sentencing, the court ordered a criminal fine of \$5,000, the forfeiture of more than 6,300 turtles, and two years' probation that allows federal agents to inspect sales records of all Strictly Reptiles' live turtles.

The court further ordered Strictly Reptiles to obtain a signed document from every buyer of undersized turtles that indicates the buyer is aware of the legal restrictions placed on the sale, or holding for sale, of these turtles.

"FDA will vigorously pursue its mission of protecting the public from those who violate the law, flagrantly disregarding the risk to public health for the sake of their own profit," says Walsky.

Tips 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 five years old, elderly people, or others 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. Use bleach to disinfect a tub or other place where turtle habitats are cleaned.
- Always wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after touching a turtle, its food or housing, or anything else that comes in contact with a turtle or its habitat.
- 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 or your family have any of these symptoms. [FDA](#)

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www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/oci072307.html

Pet Turtles: Cute But Contaminated with *Salmonella*

www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/turtles012508.html

Reptiles and *Salmonella*

www.cdc.gov/Features/ReptilesSalmonella/