

The Real Scoop on Reptile Poop for Animal Control Officers and Shelter Workers

About 93,000 cases of reptile-associated salmonella are documented each year in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Should you be worried?

The main symptoms are fever, severe abdominal cramps, and diarrhea, and those symptoms can persist for as long as a week. Most of the 800,000 to 4,000,000 Americans who contract salmonellosis every year recover without treatment—but every year, approximately 500 unlucky souls don't.



Though contaminated eggs, meat, and poultry are still the most common—and most guarded-against—sources of the salmonella bacteria, animal control officers and shelter workers must often contend with another possible source of infection: the saliva, blood, and fecal matter of the turtles, iguanas, snakes, and other reptiles they rescue and house. Salmonella is a bacteria that occurs naturally in the intestines of reptiles, and in November 1999, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that approximately 93,000 people contract salmonella from reptiles every year. Surfaces that reptiles have touched can become contaminated with the bacteria, because reptiles may have fecal matter on their skin. Salmonella can be passed from person to person, and dogs and cats can contract the disease as well.



To protect their health, shelter staff must remember to practice basic hygiene when caring for reptiles. "People should always wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water after handling reptiles or reptile cages, and any surface the reptile touches should be disinfected," says Stephanie Wong, DVM, of the Foodborne and Diarrheal Diseases Branch of the CDC. Areas where human or animal food is prepared should never be used to bathe reptiles or to wash their dishes, cages, or aquariums; tubs used to bathe reptiles should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected with bleach

before other animals are bathed in them.

"The recommendations for handling reptiles are very similar to the precautions you'd take handling animals with rabies," says Bill Garrett, executive director of the Atlanta Humane Society. "We tell our staff to follow the same procedures." These procedures include using eye protection, wearing gloves when handling reptiles with scratches or open wounds, and protecting against bodily fluid contamination. "Be especially careful with fecal matter, as it's the primary source of infections," Garrett advises.

In addition to ensuring the safety of staff and volunteers, shelters should keep the public informed by providing potential adopters of reptiles with comprehensive information on handling and health issues. The CDC warns against keeping reptiles in households with

immunocompromised people or with children younger than five years old; it goes without saying that surrendered reptiles should never be adopted out to families with young children.

Although the CDC advocates laws that require pet stores to provide point-of-sale information regarding the risk of salmonella to purchasers of reptiles, only Kansas and Maryland require pet stores to distribute information about human-health risks to reptile buyers. California, Connecticut, and Michigan require such information only for the sale of turtles. If future studies regarding reptile-associated salmonella reveal that point-of-sale information is not reducing the number of salmonella cases, the CDC will consider recommending that the sale and transport of reptiles be outlawed, says Wong.

The HSUS is already calling for such a move, recently urging the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to ban the sale of live reptiles nationwide. In a public advisory issued in December 1999, The HSUS also warned the public against keeping reptiles in homes or in public places such as day care centers and schools.

AnimalSheltering.org

