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SALMONELLOSIS

Human salmonella infection is a subject that has been a major concern in recent years. Salmonella is a bacterium that can cause serious illness in many species. Signs in humans that are exposed can range from none, to mild intestinal signs, to life threatening illness including severe vomiting, diarrhea, and dehydration, and even bacterial meningitis.

The main concern related to pets has been a number of cases of human salmonellosis, which appear to have been contracted from reptiles. Most salmonella cases are related to improper handling or undercooking of food items such as meat (especially poultry) or eggs. Approximately 5% or less of researched clinical cases are related to pet contact. Any animal can carry salmonella, often without showing any clinical illness. Cultures may detect active infection, but usually will not identify carrier animals. Some studies have shown carrier rates as high as 80% in reptiles.

Due to the difficulty in identifying salmonella carriers, the apparent frequency in many reptile populations, and the high rate of incidence of infection from other sources, it is not routinely recommended to culture apparently healthy animals for salmonella. It is better to handle all reptiles and other commonly affected species such as hedgehogs, as presumptively infected carriers and to take proper precautions.

Current recommendations from the Center for Disease Control are that anyone who is especially susceptible to infection avoid all reptile contact. This includes all children less than five years of age due to immature immune systems in young children, immunosuppressed individuals such as those infected with HIV or undergoing chemotherapy or radiation treatment, and pregnant women due to the potential for damage to the fetus.

In caring for reptiles several precautions should be taken to reduce risks.

- After handling reptiles, their cage, or any accessories, thoroughly wash your hands with hot soapy water.
- If you have an open wound on your hand, wear rubber gloves when handling the animal or cleaning its cage.

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- **ALWAYS** wear gloves when cleaning reptile cages and always use a disinfectant for cleaning. Cages should be cleaned often and sanitized with bleach water at a concentration of one part bleach to 30 parts water. Let this solution stay in contact with surfaces for 10 minutes, then rinse well and let air dry before returning your pet to its cage.
- **ALWAYS** supervise children handling reptiles. Make sure they wash hands properly after handling. Do not allow them to put any reptile in or around their mouth. Use special caution with reptiles around children less than 7 years old, adults over 65, and individuals who may be immunocompromised.
- **NEVER** kiss a reptile. Never eat, drink, or smoke when handling reptiles.
- Maintain reptiles in areas away from food preparation, serving areas, and young children's rooms.
- **NEVER** let the reptile or its food bowls come in contact with areas or utensils used to prepare human food. In other words, do not use your kitchen sink to clean any reptile furniture, dishes, or cage material.
- **NEVER** use a kitchen sink, bathroom sink, or bathtub to soak or wash reptiles, cages or dishes. Excess food or cage substrate should be thrown in the garbage or flushed down the toilet.
- **ALWAYS** feed a high quality, clean and uncontaminated food source to reptiles. Maintain reptiles in a clean, safe, and comfortable environment.
- Keep other pets away from reptile cages or pools.
- Have reptiles frequently examined by a veterinarian and screened for zoonotic infections.

The primary source of salmonella is through oral ingestion of contaminated material, but it can be inhaled or enter through an open wound, or even be absorbed through the conjunctiva of the eye if contaminated material is splashed in the eye. With proper precautions, risk can be minimized, but it is important to recognize that even an apparently healthy animal can be a sub-clinical carrier, meaning they do not show symptoms. It is crucial that we take appropriate steps to protect against this potentially fatal infection.

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