

Salmonella & Exotic Pets

Salmonella is a notorious cause of incidents of food poisoning in people and even in dogs and cats. It has also been implicated in severe cases of septicemia (blood infection) and severe internal infections which have even been fatal. However, there is increasing evidence that while Salmonella is poisonous to you or your dog, it is a normal inhabitant of the gastrointestinal tract of birds, turtles, snakes, and iguanas.

Baby boomers will remember getting tiny painted turtle pets in the mail back in the 60's. The reason that was stopped (aside from the fact that it was an inhumane practice and many died) was that too many children were getting food poisoning from popping these turtles into their mouths. As a result of that, now no "bite-size turtles" smaller than 4 inches in diameter can be sold. For years salmonella in exotic pets was regarded as a foreign organism that was poised to make them sick. Now, researchers believe that Salmonella is a normal inhabitant of the gastrointestinal tract of birds, turtles, snakes and iguanas.

Because of that, it is extremely important to educate people who own and interact with these pets. And with a few basic practices, there should be no reason why you cannot coexist with one of these animals and continue to stay healthy and thrive.

The cage of any bird, iguana, snake or turtle should be dismantled, completely scrubbed and have all bedding changed once weekly. Cleaning of cages, and bathing of animals should be done in a utility sink or bathroom, and then that basin should be thoroughly cleaned with a disinfectant after you are finished.

For iguanas, snakes and tortoises, avoid substrates that advertise that they absorb odors and can be used for months without changing. While they may neutralize odor, bacteria (Like Salmonella) will grow and thrive in the substrate and may multiply to the point where they make you or your pet sick. Remove feces frequently.

Feed aquatic turtles in a separate tank to minimize water pollution. Wait for awhile after eating, as many turtles will defecate soon after they eat. Having a large, water-filled tank will be difficult enough to keep clean and sanitary without having to worry about the added waste from decaying food and feces.

The most important practice is to vigorously wash your hands after handling these animals. Pet stores and veterinarians can also suggest soaps, hand lotions and scrubs that will effectively kill Salmonella. But in many cases, ordinary hand soap is sufficient. If claws break the surface of the skin, wash that area thoroughly as well to prevent a serious infection. Many veterinarians now offer special caps that can be glued on sharp claws to avoid scratching injuries.

Exotic pets should be kept off of food preparation surfaces in the home. In fact, avoiding the kitchen altogether is an excellent idea. As long as your exotic pets are handled with care, and treated with the same care given to raw beef and chicken, (and God forbid don't mix them up) you and your pets can expect a long, peaceful, healthy coexistence.

