

## Salmonella and Baby Turtles

Once a popular pet for children, the sale of turtles with shells less than 4 inches long has been prohibited in the United States since 1975. The federal law banning these sales was put into effect in an effort to prevent turtle-associated *Salmonella* infections (salmonellosis) in humans. Salmonellosis is caused by a bacterium. Signs and symptoms of salmonellosis commonly include diarrhea, stomach pain, vomiting, and fever. These effects typically subside within a week. However, some people can become ill enough to require hospitalization. Severe infection can cause septicemia (bacteria in the bloodstream) and, rarely, death.

Although other reptiles, such as snakes and iguanas, can carry *Salmonella*, small turtles are thought to be higher risks for exposing young children to the disease. Children might be more likely to handle small turtles or place the animals in or around their mouths. In doing so, they can accidentally ingest the bacteria.

Turtles or reptiles of any size should not be kept in households or facilities that include children younger than 5 years of age, the elderly, or people with weakened immune systems. Weakened immune systems could be caused by pregnancy, disease (for example, cancer), or certain medical treatments (for example, chemotherapy).

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services prepares minimum standards for child-care centers. Due to the risks of being exposed to *Salmonella*, these standards prohibit children at child-care centers from having contact with reptiles (including turtles, snakes, lizards, and iguanas), chickens, ducks, and amphibians (including frogs and toads).

Additionally, *Salmonella* can contaminate the containers (such as cages, tanks, or terrariums), dishes, and water with which these animals come in contact. Do not clean this equipment at the kitchen sink or in any areas where food or drink is prepared or consumed. Wear disposable gloves when washing the containers or dishes. Do not allow these animals to roam freely in your home. Immediately disinfect any surfaces in your household that these animals contact.

Always wash your hands with warm soap and running water after handling reptiles or their containers, water, or feces. Teach your children to do the same. Keep in mind that reptiles carrying *Salmonella* usually do not become ill and so will not appear to be sick.

In Texas, all stores that sell reptiles are required to distribute written warnings to people who buy reptiles and post warning signs regarding reptile-associated salmonellosis. This law, plus samples of the signs and warnings containing the required language, can be obtained through the Texas Department of State Health Services.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department also has turtle regulations that require a nongame permit for possessing, transporting, or selling certain turtles. However, the federal law that bans the sale of small turtles (shell less than 4 inches long) overrides this

law and is still in effect. If you suspect that somebody is illegally selling these animals, contact the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Previously captive turtles might have difficulty surviving if released into the wild. Check with various pet stores and animal shelters, as some of them have humane programs in which they will accept turtles in need of sanctuary.

#### References:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): 1-800-232-4636

<http://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/small-turtles-10-15/index.html>

General information on salmonellosis

[www.cdc.gov/healthypets/resources/amphibian-reptile-poster.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/resources/amphibian-reptile-poster.pdf)

Poster on exposure to *Salmonella* by reptiles and amphibians

Code of Federal Regulations:

<http://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cdrh/cfdocs/cfcfr/cfrsearch.cfm?fr=1240.62>

Federal law banning the sale of small turtles

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services: 512-438-4800

[http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child\\_Care/Child\\_Care\\_Standards\\_and\\_Regulations/default.asp](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Care/Child_Care_Standards_and_Regulations/default.asp)

Texas Administrative Code, Minimum Standards for Child-care Centers, Title 40, Chapter 746, Section 746.3905

Texas Department of State Health Services: 512-776-7111

<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/idcu/disease/salmonellosis/law/>

Texas Health and Safety Code, Communicable Diseases, Chapter 81, Sections 81.351-353

Texas Administrative Code, Reptile-associated Salmonellosis, Title 25, Chapter 169, Section 169.121

Sample sign and written warning containing information required by state law

Texas Department of State Health Services, Zoonosis Control, Health Service Region 11, Harlingen:

*Turtles, Reptiles, and Salmonella*, Monthly Newsletter – May 2012

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department: 512-389-4828

[http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd\\_if\\_w7000\\_1667.pdf](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_if_w7000_1667.pdf)

Texas Administrative Code, Texas Turtle Regulations, Title 31, Chapter 65, Section 65.331

From the Texas Department of State Health Services, Zoonosis Control