

## **Baby Turtles: More Deadly than Rattlesnakes**

Our topics for this week are:

- **Salmonellosis symptoms and signs**
- **Reptile carriers of salmonellosis**
- **Effectiveness of the federal ban on the sale of baby turtles**

Each year in the U.S. about 5 people die of venomous snakebite. In comparison, around 400 people die each year from over 1 million cases of salmonellosis. Most cases are acquired from poultry products and uncooked eggs, but reptiles also commonly carry Salmonella. Most people are more likely to get Salmonella from handling reptiles and become sick or die than be bitten by a venomous snake.

### **Salmonellosis Signs and Symptoms**

Salmonellosis is caused by a bacteria that can live in the digestive tract in carriers without causing illness. The bacteria is passed in the carrier's bowel movements and contaminates anything it touches or water that it enters. Salmonellosis in non-carriers, especially humans with immature or weakened immune systems, causes diarrhea which may be bloody, as well as fever, abdominal pain, and vomiting. Death is possible. One source of salmonellosis is reptiles, especially those that live in wet environments. The reptiles do not appear ill.

### **Reptile Carriers of Salmonellosis**

The reptiles most likely to be handled by small children are baby turtles. The bacteria is on the turtles' skin and shells and in their terrariums, or where bowls and other terrarium contents are washed. Children are particularly at risk due to their immature immune systems and hand to mouth habits. However, it is important to realize it is not just baby turtles that carry and transmit salmonellosis. It is all reptiles. Baby turtles just are more inviting to be handled.

### **Federal Ban on the Sale of Baby Turtles**

Since 1975 the Food and Drug Administration has banned the sale of turtles less than 4 inches in diameter. However, they are sold illegally or given free with the purchase of a terrarium, which is also illegal. Three of the nation's biggest reptile expos are in Iowa, Minnesota, and Kansas City, MO and each has had baby turtles for sale in the last two years. They are also sold with impunity and without health warnings on the internet. There have been large outbreaks of salmonellosis related to baby turtles in 2011, 2013, 2017, and 2021. In the last outbreak, 87 people in 20 states were infected. Most cases were in California, Nevada, Georgia, and Pennsylvania. 45% were children under the age of 5 years. One in Pennsylvania died.

## Recommendations

1. Do not buy baby turtles or receive them as gifts.
2. Always wash your hands with soap and water after handling a reptile or anything the reptile has touched, including turtles in the wild that you help across a road.
3. If you have a child under 5 years of age, do not keep any reptile as a pet.
4. Do not allow pet reptiles to roam freely in your house, especially any room where food is prepared or consumed. Restrict reptiles to terrariums.
5. Never clean terrariums or anything reptiles touch in a sink or tub. Clean them outside and disinfect with clorox diluted to 1 part to 9 parts of water.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Salmonellosis is a bacterial disease that can cause severe illness and death.**
- 2. Baby turtles are a common source of salmonellosis in children and people with impaired immune systems.**
- 3. Selling or gifting a baby turtle under 4 inches in diameter is a federal crime.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources. My new spiral-bound handbook, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling* was recently published and can be found on Amazon as well as from other book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 100 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.