



# Child Safety and Health around Pets



## Responsible pet ownership



Compiled by:  
Department of Public Health, HSE Midlands

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## Introduction:

- ▶ Pets are a valuable part of many family settings, providing companionship and entertainment.
- ▶ Caring for pets can provide mental and physical health benefits. For instance:
  - Stroking a pet can lower blood pressure.
  - Caring for a pet can boost a child's confidence and can help to teach children to be responsible and caring. Children who are good to their pets are generally considerate of people.
  - Children with autism can be assisted through interaction with pets.
  - Pets can have beneficial effects in patient care settings.
- ▶ To make sure interaction with pets is safe and healthy, follow the advice in this booklet and:  
**Remember that the priority is always your child's safety and health**  
**Supervise your child's contact with pets** and **practice careful hand hygiene**



## This booklet:

- ▶ Our aim is to give advice to **help children stay safe and healthy around pets**.
- ▶ Regardless of the type of pet you own, please **read the first 3 pages** to get some useful information about child safety and health around any type of pet.
- ▶ **Consult your GP** immediately if you have any health concerns.
- ▶ For specific animal health and care advice, **talk to your vet or veterinary nurse**.
- ▶ The booklet is laid out as follows:

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- ▶ We have compiled just some of the excellent information available about pets. If you wish to find out more, each section contains the references to the original information used.

## Things to remember:

- ▶ Most safety and health risks posed by pets can be greatly reduced by:
  - Careful **supervision** of children around pets
  - Following **good hand hygiene** practice
  - Teaching your child how to:
    - Play safely with pets
    - Avoid dangerous situations
    - Respond to danger signs
    - **Wash their hands** carefully after all contact with pets and other animals
  - Always modelling safe behaviour around pets – children copy what they see parents and adults doing.
  - Recognising when your pet is sick *and*
  - Getting immediate advice from your vet - the earlier you get advice and treatment, the less chance there is of the illness passing on to you or your child.
  - Keep sick pets and other sick animals away from children.

## Choosing a pet for your family:

- ▶ **The priority is always your child's safety.**
- ▶ Only own a pet if you have the space, time and money to care for it properly.
- ▶ Before choosing a pet, call into your local veterinary practice and talk to the vet or duty veterinary nurse – their advice will be invaluable.
- ▶ Choose a pet that suits your family's lifestyle, home and outdoor space.
- ▶ *Reptiles are not suitable pets for households which have children under the age of 5 years.*
- ▶ *Certain breeds of dogs (see page 5) and any dog with behavioural problems require an additional level of care, control and supervision. Consider carefully whether such animals are suitable for your family.*
- ▶ Only purchase or obtain your pet from a reputable source. Before you bring the pet home, make sure it is healthy and happy. Satisfy yourself that it was well cared for and that all paperwork and vaccine records are in order.
- ▶ Consider the safety of introducing a pet into a family with small children.
- ▶ Talk to your vet or visit [www.asPCA.org](http://www.asPCA.org) if you:
  - are choosing a pet – you need to make sure you choose an animal which is appropriate for your child's age.
  - already own a cat or a dog and you are expecting a baby or bringing a child to live with you
    - it is important to prepare the pet for the new arrival.

## Some of the risks from pets to child safety and health:

- ▶ There are many advantages to having pets in the family and this booklet does not discourage pet ownership. However, to keep children safe it is important to know about some of the potential risks associated with pet ownership:
  - Bites (which can be serious) and scratches
  - Allergies or asthma triggered by animal fur, saliva, feathers and skin flakes (dandruff)
  - Zoonotic diseases - diseases that humans can get from animals. Although pets can carry germs, it is important to know that you are **usually** more likely to get some of these germs from infected food or water than from your pet. The risk of zoonotic diseases is higher for -
    - Young children and elderly people
    - People with a **compromised** immune system\*
    - Pregnant women – the unborn baby's immune system is not fully developed
  - Fall injuries – from being knocked over by a pet or from tripping over a pet, its toys, bowl, litter box
  - Choking injuries – children swallowing the pet's food or toys

\* If any member of your family is immuno-compromised, get advice from your health care provider if you have a pet or if you are thinking of getting a pet.

## Reducing the risks from pets in the home:

### 1. Supervision and separation:

- ▶ Pets and young children should be gradually introduced to each other.
- ▶ **All** contact between young children and pets should be **directly supervised**. This means that an adult:
  - is in close range of the child and pet (preferably holding the child or restraining the pet) *and*
  - can immediately intervene if necessary.
- ▶ When this cannot happen, the pet must be physically separated from young children – for instance put the pet in its cage, fenced area, outside or in separate part of house.
- ▶ Pets should not be allowed into a child's bedroom whilst the child is sleeping.
- ▶ Pets must be securely restrained when travelling in a vehicle where a child is a passenger.
- ▶ Children also need to be able play and to explore outdoors without any risk from the household pet. So any animals outside need to be physically separated from children - for example by use of a pet run/cage, making sure the pet has toys to keep it amused.
- ▶ All food and water bowls, litter trays and toys must also be physically separated from children.
- ▶ If this is not possible, fence off an area in which the child can play.



**Watch your child at all times, as children do not understand danger.**

### 2. Animal health and wellbeing:

- ▶ All animals, birds and reptiles kept in the home or garden must be in a clean and healthy condition.
- ▶ A constant supply of fresh drinking water should be supplied and a nutritionally balanced diet provided – consult your vet for advice.
- ▶ As there is a range of diseases that animals and pets can pass onto humans, get your vet's advice about your specific pet, for example:
  - How do I care for it – grooming, claw trimming, housing, feeding, illnesses?
  - What vaccines does it need?
  - Does it need worming, flea and/or tick control and, if so, how often?

### 3. If your pet is sick:

- ▶ If your pet shows any signs of sickness, skin disease or behavioural problems, get advice from your vet **immediately** and follow his/her instructions carefully.
- ▶ Keep sick animals away from children and be extra careful with cleaning and hand washing.

### 4. Hygiene:



- ▶ **Wash your hands carefully** after handling your pet, its litter tray, droppings, feed bowls, bedding, toys, or cage.
- ▶ **Show your child how to do the same.**
- ▶ Animal droppings (faeces/poo) need to be regularly cleared up and bedding should be changed often.
- ▶ Do not store or prepare your pet's food near human food.
- ▶ Keep pet food bowls away from children. You do not want them eating the pet's food - it may be a choking hazard and it is definitely not hygienic!
- ▶ Remove uneaten pet food promptly so that it does not attract pests.
- ▶ Keep pet water bowls away from children – again you do not want your child drinking the pet's water and remember **young children can drown in a very small amount of water.**
- ▶ If a child is bitten or scratched, wash the wound immediately and use disinfectant cream/solution. Always contact your GP if you are worried about a wound or if a wound is not healing properly.

**Remember**, while pet ownership gives a sense of responsibility to children, **only adults can be truly responsible for pets.**

Information on this page is adapted from:

- ▶ *Child Safety [Animal and Pet Safety]. Inter Country Adoption Service, Melbourne*

## Dogs:



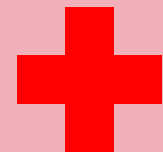
- ▶ We provide a lot of information here on child safety around dogs because:
  - Your child is more likely to come into contact with dogs than with any other pet.
  - Even if you don't own a dog yourself, your child will likely visit a house which has one, will encounter dogs on the street or in the park.
  - Dogs are more likely to approach a child than any other pet.
- ▶ **No dog is 100% safe** – all dogs, even the most gentle, are potential biters if we behave incorrectly around them.
- ▶ **Never** leave a baby or small child alone with a dog. Never means **NEVER!** Even a few seconds alone with a dog can result in serious consequences for your child.
- ▶ Children, especially under 10 years, **must be supervised at all times** when a dog is near by or is being played with – if you can't supervise, the dog must be isolated in a safe place.

## Dog bites:

- ▶ As many as half of 12 year old children will have been bitten by a dog.
- ▶ **Most dog bites are from a dog known to the child** – their own dog, a neighbour's or friend's dog. In many cases the dog bites after being teased or even unintentionally provoked – for example, approaching a dog when it is sleeping or eating.
- ▶ Children under the age of 5 years are most at risk of dog bites and are often bitten on the head and face.
- ▶ Bites which may not even break an adult's skin can be devastating on a small child.

## If a child is bitten by a dog:

- ▶ Move the child to a safe area.
- ▶ Confine the dog if safe to do so.
- ▶ Stay calm and reassure the child.
- ▶ **Minor skin wounds:**
  - If the bite has broken the skin, wash the area under running water, apply antiseptic and cover with a plaster.
  - You should bring the child to your GP, even for small wounds, as dog bites often get infected.
  - Your GP will check the wound and, if necessary, give a tetanus booster injection and/or prescribe antibiotics.
- ▶ **Serious wounds:**
  - Call an ambulance (Ring 999 or 112).
  - Apply pressure to the wound with a sterile dressing or a clean cloth.
  - If you can, keep the injury raised above heart level – this will help slow bleeding.
  - Do not give the child any food or water.
  - The ambulance team will take over care as soon as they arrive.
- ▶ Always go back to your GP if the wounds do not heal properly or look like they are infected – weeping, red, swollen or feel hot to touch.
- ▶ Dog attacks must always be **reported to the Gardai and to the local authority dog control service.**







## General advice:

- ▶ You need to be responsible for making sure the relationship between your children and your dog is as safe as possible.
- ▶ Do not encourage young children to discipline a dog – teach them to call an adult to do so.
- ▶ An adult must always go with a child who is taking a dog for a walk.
- ▶ **Watch your child at all times** - children are very likely to get confused about a dog's body language – 60% of children between 5 and 9 years of age misinterpret dog behaviours in situations which could lead to biting. For example, mistaking a dog wagging its tail for a friendly dog, even when it is growling, barking or baring his teeth!
- ▶ **Watch your child at all times** - even though dogs can be trained they still have instinctive behaviours. It **does not matter how well you know the dog** – young children can unintentionally provoke the dog who may, in turn, snap.
- ▶ Get advice and help to make sure:



- You know how to care for and treat your dog
  - Your dog is well trained and socialised
  - Your dog has basic commands like, “Sit”, “Stay” and “Heel”. Check out websites like the *Dublin Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* ([www.dspca.ie](http://www.dspca.ie)) for lots of useful information.
- ▶ Follow the rules yourself! Children learn their behaviour from the adults around them - so model the safe and caring way to interact with the dog.

## The law and dogs:

- ▶ Under laws like *The Control of Dogs Act*, *The Control of Dogs Regulations* and *The Litter Pollution Act*, dog owners have certain legal obligations. For instance:
  - It is an offence for you to keep a dog unless you have a licence for it.
  - Your dog must be accompanied by and be under your effective control, or the control of another responsible person, if it is outside your home or premises.
  - Dogs must at all times wear a collar with the name and the address of the owner inscribed on it or on a plate, badge or disc.
  - It is an offence to allow a dog under your control to foul a public place – so the owner/person in charge of the dog is required to remove dog faeces and dispose of them in a suitable, sanitary manner.
  - Additional rules are in place for breeds (and strains/cross-breeds) of dogs which are deemed as dangerous due to their size or strength or original breed function;
    - American pit bull terrier
    - English bull terrier
    - Staffordshire bull terrier
    - Bull mastiff
    - Dobermann pinscher
    - German shepherd (Alsatian)
    - Rhodesian ridgeback
    - Rottweiler
    - Japanese akita
    - Japanese tosa
    - Every dog of the type commonly known as Ban Dog(or Bandog)

From [www.environment.ie](http://www.environment.ie) (accessed 24.04.2012)

- When in a public place, these dogs (and strains/cross-breeds) must always be:
  - securely muzzled
  - kept on a short, strong leash or chain
  - walked only by a person over 16 years who is capable of controlling them

## Please note:

- ▶ Any dog on the list above and any dog with behavioural problems requires a different level of responsible ownership.
- ▶ Consider carefully whether you can provide this, keeping in mind that your child's safety and the safety of other children and people is always the priority.



## Infectious diseases which can be associated with dogs:

- ▶ It is a small risk, but some dogs carry diseases which can be harmful to humans – like parasitic worms, fleas, lice, mange (scabies), ticks, ringworm (fungal infection), cryptosporidium, giardia, salmonella and campylobacter.
- ▶ See page 9 for information about [Toxocariasis](#).
- ▶ Talk to your GP and tell him/her that you are pet owner if you or your child:
  - Develop any symptoms of intestinal illness, for instance, diarrhoea, vomiting, upset stomach
  - Notice a ring-shaped rash that is reddish and may be itchy *or* any skin irritation that is not normal for you or your child
- ▶ Talk to your vet if you notice any signs of illness or skin irritation in your dog – **keep children away from a sick dog**.

### Lyme disease:

- This can be caught from the bite of an infected tick (tiny, spider-like creature).
- Ticks can drop onto humans and animals from trees and plants – most commonly when walking in grass or woodland.
- If you, your child or your pet is bitten by a tick, seek advice on how to correctly remove it. It is important to avoid the risk of infection that can come with damaging the tick.
- See your GP, and report being bitten by a tick, if any of the following symptoms appear:
  - red, raised skin rash (often called a “bull’s eye” rash) *and/or*
  - fever, chills, muscle or joint pains, headaches, stiff neck
- Be tick aware – check your dog and any other outdoor pet thoroughly and regularly for ticks. Your vet can show you how to do this.
- Check yourself and your child for ticks if you’ve been out in grass or woodland.
- Use a good insect repellent (making sure it is suitable for children) and keep arms and legs covered when engaging in outdoor activities.
- For more information, visit [www.tickbitepreventionweek.org](http://www.tickbitepreventionweek.org) .



Bull's eye rash. CDC

## Health and hygiene:

- ▶ Only get your dog from a reputable source – make sure the dog is healthy and well cared for, and all paperwork and vaccination records are in order.
- ▶ Talk to your vet about:
  - Grooming – your dog should be kept well groomed and clean
  - Claw trimming - this is particularly important to protect children from scratches
  - Controlling fleas, ticks and worms
  - Nutrition
  - Making sure all your dog's vaccinations are up to date
  - Any concerns you have about your dog's health
- ▶ Pick up your dog's droppings immediately – whether in your garden, or out on a walk – and dispose of them hygienically.
- ▶ Make sure you and your children **wash your hands carefully** after any contact with the dog, his droppings, saliva (drool), food/water bowls and toys.

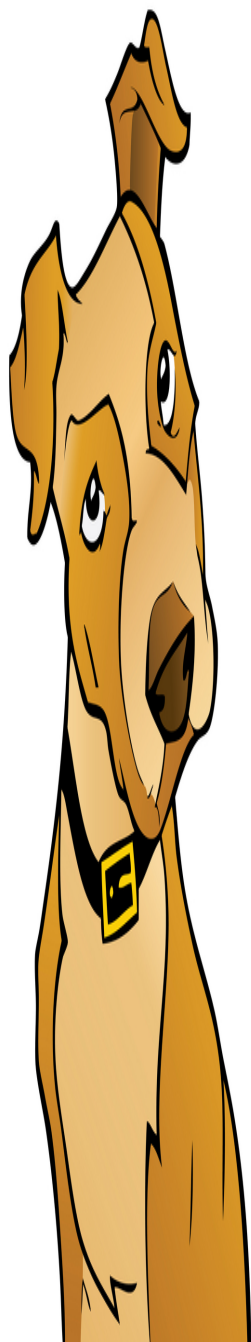
## Teach your child to be “safe and sound” around dogs:

- ▶ Even if you do not have a dog, your children are going to come into contact with dogs so **all children should be educated about dog safety**:
  - Play the interactive “Safe and Sound Game” ([www2.the-kennel-club.org.uk/](http://www2.the-kennel-club.org.uk/)) with your children and check out the “How to stay safe around dogs” leaflet ([www.learnwithdogs.ie](http://www.learnwithdogs.ie)).
  - Follow the points on the next page and consider completing a *safety around dogs promise sheet* with your children (see page 16 for sample).



## Help your child stay safe:

- ▶ Although no dog is 100% safe, through careful supervision and education, almost 100% of dog bite injuries are preventable.
- ▶ **Watch your child at all times** around dogs.
- ▶ **Show and teach** your child ways to be safer around dogs:



- ✓ **Don't hug and kiss dogs** - remember face-to-face contact is a common cause of bites to the face.
- ✓ **Never disturb a sleeping dog** – he may get a fright and bite.
- ✓ **Never sneak up on a dog and never tease or annoy dogs** - any dog can bite if it is scared, confused or in pain.
- ✓ **Don't run and shout around dogs.**
- ✓ **Stay away from a dog that is protecting something** – its puppies, its owner's house/garden/car, its own kennel area, toys or food.
- ✓ **Don't teach dogs to play rough** - games like tug of war and chasing should not be encouraged as the dog wins by strength.
- ✓ **Play games of skill** – games like fetch – where a treat is exchanged for the “fetched” item when the dog drops it on the ground - or hide and seek – where the dog must find something or someone.
- ✓ **Keep away from a dog that's eating** - it may bite while trying to protect its food.
- ✓ **Feed the dog on the ground and in its own space** - never from your hand or your plate. A dog may accidentally bite while trying to take food from your hand. Dogs are protective of food, so always feed them away from where children play.
- ✓ **Not all dogs are as friendly as your own dog** – never approach a dog, even a dog they have met before, without an adult present and always ask the dog's owner if you can approach the dog.
- ✓ **Teach children 'dog language'** – dogs will often try to tell us that they are angry or afraid before they bite. So can your child recognise when their dog is relaxed, playful, scared angry? Does your child know to leave the dog alone when it is annoyed? Does your child know never to stare into a dog's eyes – even their own trusted pet's?
- ✓ **Stand still like a statue if a dog approaches you** - running may provoke the dog to chase and attack. If you need to move, back away slowly.
- ✓ **Roll into a ball, cover your face with your arms and hands and lie still like a rock if a dog knocks you down** – helps to protect the child's face.
- ✓ **Always ask the owner's permission to pet a dog** and then **before you pet it:**
  - let the dog see you, decide to come to you and sniff you – hold out the back of your hand, keeping your fingers curled in, your hand low and your arm relaxed
  - **Pet dogs gently and calmly** on their chin, neck or side of chest – **not the head!**
- ✓ **Never try to stop dogs fighting.**

### Information on pages 4-7 is adapted from:

- ▶ *Protecting Yourself against Tick Bites and Lyme Disease.* Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC)
- ▶ *Control of Dogs.* Citizens Information
- ▶ *Child Safety Around Dogs.* Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (DSPCA)
- ▶ *Children and Safety with Pets.* Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne
- ▶ *Safe and Sound Teacher's Notes.* The Kennel Club. 2004
- ▶ *A healthy pet is a safe pet.* PAWS. 1998





## Cats:



- ▶ The main health risks come from:
  - Children touching the cat's droppings or something contaminated/infected with droppings and then touching their own mouths or food before hands are washed
  - Infection or injury from cat scratches and bites – seek medical advice if you are concerned about a bite or scratch
  - Ringworm – after coming in contact with a cat with signs of ringworm infection
- ▶ Babies and cats should not be left together unsupervised.
- ▶ Do not allow cats into any room where a baby or young child is sleeping - there is a danger that a cat may settle to sleep near the baby/young child's face, thus interfering with breathing.

### Cat moods:



- ▶ Children should be taught:
  - Cats are quite unpredictable and can scratch or bite without any warning
  - Do not annoy the cat – teasing, tail pulling
  - Most cats do not like to be rubbed on their bellies
  - Leave the cat alone if he hisses, yowls, arches his back, bares his teeth or flattens back his ears

**Watch your child at all times**

### Infectious diseases which can be associated with cats:

- ▶ **Toxoplasmosis:**
  - Cat droppings can contain a parasite which causes toxoplasmosis.
  - Many people who get this disease do not have any symptoms, but it can cause a mild, flu-like illness and/or prolonged glandular-fever type illness.
  - If you notice any symptoms, get advice from your GP and make sure to tell him/her that you are a cat owner.
  - While toxoplasmosis is not usually serious for a **healthy** child or adult, if a woman becomes infected with toxoplasmosis during pregnancy, there is a big risk that her baby will be infected and this can cause visual and developmental handicap.
  - **This does not mean that the cat has to be banished during a woman's pregnancy** as touching and rubbing pet cats is **very unlikely** to cause infection.
  - To minimise the risk of transmission of toxoplasmosis:
    - Keep your cat healthy, with the help of your vet.
    - Do not feed raw meat to cats and try to prevent them hunting – perhaps use a bell collar.
    - **Wash your hands carefully** straight after handling the cat, its litter tray, feed bowl or toys. Teach your children to do the same.
    - Clean the litter box every day – only an adult should do this and **pregnant women should avoid contact with the litter tray if at all possible.**
    - Wear rubber gloves if handling dirty cat litter and litter tray. Consider buying disposable gloves for the purpose and binning them each time.
    - Consider using disposable litter tray liners. When discarding the dirty cat litter, do so carefully – do not allow it to puff into the air as breathing in the dust could infect you. Gently place it in a bag, seal it and bin it.
    - Wash your rubber gloves/bin your disposable gloves and **wash your hands carefully** straight afterwards.
    - Disinfect the litter tray regularly – fill with boiling water and allow to stand for 5 minutes. Be mindful of **scalds - keep the tray away from children.**



### ▶ Cat Scratch Fever:



- This can enter the body when a cat scratch breaks the surface of the skin (draws blood) - **most cat scratches do not lead to Cat Scratch Fever.**
- Fleas may also be involved in the spread of the disease to humans.
- It lasts for several weeks, usually causing a lump at the injury site, fever, fatigue and sore and swollen glands.
- It is rarely a problem for anyone with a healthy immune system and antibiotic treatment of the sick person and the cat usually clears up this infection.
- To reduce the risk of getting this illness:



- **Watch young children at all times** when they are playing with the cat.
  - **Make sure hands are carefully washed** after handling the cat, its litter, litter tray, bowl or toys.
  - Avoid "rough play" with the cat and don't let it bite or scratch.
  - Wash all bites and scratches immediately with soap and water.
  - Use good flea control.
- If your child, or you, is scratched or bitten and gets a wound that will not heal, a fever, unusual skin lesions or is sick from an unknown cause, see your GP and let him/her know about the scratch or bite.

### ▶ Toxocariasis:

- Toxocariasis is an infection that can cause serious illness, including organ damage and eye disease.
- Infected cats and dogs shed *Toxocaro* eggs in their droppings.
- People, and especially children, become infected by swallowing dirt which has been infected with *Toxocaro* eggs. As cats tend to bury their droppings, it is easy for humans to come into contact with cat droppings without realising it.
- While many people with Toxocariasis do not have any symptoms, those who are sick may experience:
  - High temperature
  - Organ damage
  - Stomach pain
  - Vision problems, eye pain, red eyes
  - Breathing difficulties
- See your GP immediately if you think you or your child may be affected.
- To reduce the risk of getting this illness:
  - Make sure hands are carefully washed after playing outdoors
  - Teach children not to touch their mouths whilst playing outdoors or whilst playing with pets
  - Cover sandboxes and restrict animal access to play areas
  - Dispose of dog and cat droppings promptly and wash your hands fully afterwards
  - Wear gloves when gardening and wash gloves and hands carefully afterwards
  - Get your vet's advice and make sure your cat and dog is properly wormed

### ▶ Other diseases:

- Cats can sometimes be the source of intestinal illnesses such as salmonella, campylobacter, giardia and cryptosporidium.
- These can be spread to humans by contact with infected animal droppings, soil or cat litter, for instance, by touching one's mouth with infected hands, or eating food which has been touched by infected hands.
- **Careful handwashing** will help prevent such spread.
- If your cat has diarrhoea or any other sign of illness, contact your vet. Remember though, cats do not always have symptoms – so careful hand hygiene is always important.
- If you develop any symptoms of intestinal illness, talk to your GP and make sure to tell him/her that you are a pet owner.



- Some cats get a disease commonly known as Cat AIDS. This disease **cannot be passed onto humans** and is not the same as the human AIDS virus. However, cats with this disease may be more likely to pick up other infections, so be extra careful with handwashing and with litter trays.

› **Health and hygiene:**

- Do not allow children dig around in the garden area that the cat uses and keep litter trays away from children and away from kitchen and eating areas.
- Thoroughly wash cat bites or scratches - cats have a lot of nasty bacteria on their teeth and claws. Seek medical advice if a bite or scratch is not healing, becomes infected or if you are worried in any way.
- Talk to your vet about:
  - Grooming
  - Claw trimming - this is particularly important to protect children from scratches
  - Controlling fleas, ticks and worms
  - Nutrition
  - Making sure all your cat's vaccinations are up to date.
  - Any concerns you have about your cat's health.
- The risk of getting a disease from your cat is greatly reduced by making sure to **wash your hands carefully** after handling the cat, its litter/litter tray, bowl, or toys. **Make sure your children do the same.**

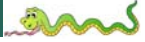


Information on pages 8-10 is adapted from:

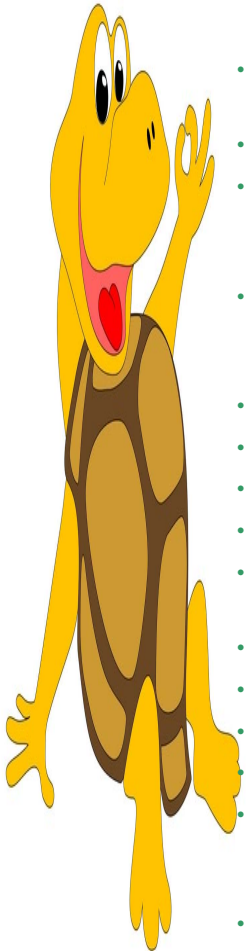
- › *Pet Safety Guide for Parents and Children.* Permanente Medical
- › *Toxoplasmosis Fact Sheet.* Dept of Public Health, Midlands
- › *Toxocariasis Fact Sheet.* Center for Global Health. Division of Parasitic Diseases and Malaria
- › *Your cat and your health.* PAWS, USA



## Reptiles:



- ▶ All reptiles, for example, snakes, turtles, tortoises and lizards require careful handling as they carry a range of germs including bacteria, viruses, parasites and worms. Many of these can be passed on to the family of reptile owners. The most significant of these include:
  - Salmonella - commonly found in all types of reptiles and can spread from reptiles to humans when something contaminated/infected with reptile faeces is placed in the mouth. It causes diarrhoea, headache, fever and stomach cramps and can result in septicaemia (blood poisoning). Dehydration can be severe.
  - Botulism - a serious and life-threatening illness caused by a toxin released by the Clostridium bacterium that causes paralysis and death. Clostridium commonly infects reptiles, especially aquatic reptiles. Exposure to turtles or to turtle feed was the likely cause in at least one case of infant botulism in Ireland.
  - Other infections: illness such as campylobacteriosis (a bowel infection), leptospirosis (a liver disease), trichinellosis (a disease of muscles, the nervous system and the heart and lungs) have been associated with keeping reptiles and while most are treatable, some can be very serious.
- ▶ For most people keeping reptiles does not pose a significant health risk, as long as proper hygiene and care is maintained:
  - All reptiles should be considered to be contaminated with at least one of the above bacteria.
  - Do not keep reptiles as pets in a house where there are **children under the age of 5 years**.
  - **Watch your children at all times** during their contact with the reptile.
  - Pregnant women, elderly or frail adults or immuno-suppressed people (e.g. people with cancer, HIV/AIDS, people with a CD4 count less than 200) should avoid all contact with reptiles.
  - Do not touch your mouth after handling your reptile, its tanks, equipment, bowls, food and droppings, until you **wash your hands carefully**. Teach your child to do the same.
  - Keep reptiles out of any area where food is prepared or eaten.
  - Where possible, **keep your reptile in its tank or cage** – do not let it loose.
  - Wash with hot water any surfaces with which your reptile has had contact.
  - Only wash your reptile in its own basin. Never use sinks or the bath.
  - Always wear disposable gloves when cleaning tanks, cages, or equipment and **wash hands carefully** afterwards.
  - Waste water and droppings should be disposed of in the toilet or outside drain.
  - Do not eat, drink, or smoke while handling reptiles, reptile tanks or reptile equipment.
  - Do not, and do not allow children, kiss reptiles or share food or drink with them.
  - Use a warm/hot wash to clean clothes that have been in contact with your reptile.
  - If a child is bitten or scratched, wash the wound immediately and use disinfectant cream/solution. Always contact your GP if you are worried about a wound or if a wound is not healing properly.
  - Follow expert advice on the feeding and welfare of your reptile. Stress to the animal can cause it to shed Salmonella and other disease causing agents.
  - Ask your local vet or specialist reptile vet for further information on reptiles.



**If you have a reptile and you/your child has any of the symptoms outlined above, contact your GP for advice and tell him/her that you are a reptile owner.**

Information on page 11 is adapted from:

- ▶ *Reptiles and the Risk of Infectious Diseases*. Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC). 2011





## Birds – budgies, parrots etc:

- ▶ Birds will nip or bite in self-defence – maybe after being frightened by a toddler’s screaming or after being poked with a finger/stick or having its cage interfered with.

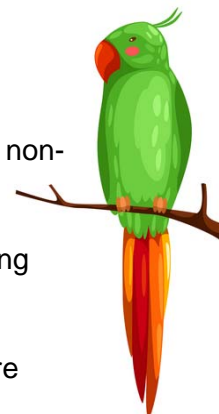
### Reducing risk of bites:

- ▶ Teach young children how to interact with the bird - soft voice, no sudden movements, no prodding, poking or making noise at the cage.
- ▶ Do not allow shaking the cage or poking it with sharp objects.
- ▶ Hang the cage out of reach of toddlers and young children.
- ▶ If a child is bitten or scratched, wash the wound immediately and use disinfectant cream/solution. Always contact your GP if you are worried about a wound or if a wound is not healing properly.

### Infectious diseases which can be associated with pet birds:

#### ▶ Psittacosis (“Parrot Fever”):

- In humans, Psittacosis causes flu-like symptoms and is usually accompanied by a dry, non-productive cough and fever. It is especially dangerous for pregnant women, immuno-compromised people, the elderly, and those with respiratory problems.
- It can be caught from all types of parrots, including budgies, by breathing dust containing dried bird droppings.
- While it can be treated using antibiotics, it is still a dangerous illness, so be alert to the symptoms and seek immediate treatment. Make sure to let your GP or other healthcare provider know that you are a parrot owner when you go for treatment.
- Children have less resistance to parrot fever than adults and should be shown how to **wash their hands carefully** after any contact with the bird, its cage, droppings, toys or feeding bowls.



#### ▶ Allergic Alveolitis (“Bird Fancier’s Lung”):

- This disease results in coughing and difficulty breathing.
- It can be alleviated by total avoidance of bird dander (skin flakes) and feathers.
- If you or your child has this condition, birds should not be kept as pets.

#### ▶ Salmonella:

- Symptoms can include, diarrhoea, tummy pains, temperature, nausea (and sometimes vomiting), headache. Salmonella is most commonly caught from eating infected foods, however, it can be spread by contact with infected droppings or animal/cat litter.
- If you or your child develops these symptoms, contact your GP. Make sure to tell him/her that you are a pet owner.
- The risk of getting salmonella from a pet is greatly reduced by **careful handwashing** after handling the pet, its litter, cage, bowl, or toys. **Make sure your children do the same.**

#### ▶ Mycobacterium Avian Complex (MAC):

- MAC, also known as Atypical Mycobacterium, is a disease similar to TB and is usually associated with those who are immuno-compromised (with CD4 counts below 100).
- Typical symptoms of MAC include night sweats, weight loss, fever, fatigue, diarrhoea and enlarged spleen.
- If you are a bird owner and experience any of these symptoms, contact your GP and make sure to inform him/her that you are a bird owner.
- It is a lifelong infection, but there are drugs which can help control human infections of MAC.

**Keep your pet bird healthy with the help of your vet**

Information on page 12 is adapted from:

- ▶ *Questions you may have about your bird and your health.* PAWS. USA
- ▶ *Parrots Care and Safety- Proper interaction.* [www.petparrots101.com](http://www.petparrots101.com)





## Fish:



- ▶ Pet fish can sometimes be a source of infectious diseases – they can occasionally spread mycobacterial infections and some skin infections can be spread by contact with infected water.
- ▶ Therefore, reduce risk by:
  - Choosing healthy fish from your pet shop – don't buy from shops where you can see dead fish in the tanks or where goldfish are being raised in murky water. Avoid fish which have:
    - Fungus growing on its scales
    - Sores
    - Torn fins
    - Fins that fall to one side
    - Hazy eyes
  - Cleaning the fish tank as often as is recommended by your pet store or vet.
  - Wearing gloves when cleaning a fish tank or handling fish and **washing hands carefully** when finished.
  - **Watch your child at all times** - keep the fish tank out of reach of young children.
  - Supervise your children's contact with the fish and tank and make sure they **wash their hands carefully** after any such contact.



Information above is adapted from:

- ▶ *Pet Care – Gold Fish and Kids.* [www.kidscharts.com](http://www.kidscharts.com)
- ▶ *A healthy pet is a safe pet.* PAWS. 1998



## Rabbits:



- ▶ Rabbits are ground-loving creatures who like being petted and groomed but may not be a big fan of hugs or cuddles! For this reason, they may not be a suitable pet for young children.
- ▶ A rabbit under pressure will lash out – bite or scrape. The most common child safety and health problems usually come from reactions to, or infections from, rabbit scratches and bites.
- ▶ To reduce the risk of bites and scratches:
  - Get advice from your vet about claw trimming.
  - Supervise children's contact with the rabbit and teach them how to treat the rabbit:
    - Leave him alone when he hops away or goes in his cage.
    - Don't allow young children to pick up the rabbit.
    - Teach older children how to hold a rabbit correctly - use both hands and support the back legs properly. Do not pick up rabbits by their ears or by the scruff of their necks.
    - **Watch your child at all times.**
- ▶ If a child is bitten or scratched, wash the wound immediately and use disinfectant cream/solution. Always contact your GP if you are worried about a wound or if a wound is not healing properly.



### Infectious diseases which can be associated with pet rabbits:

- ▶ Spread of diseases from rabbits to humans is quite rare, however:
  - Do not allow children to touch droppings and litter.
  - Make sure you and your child **wash hands carefully** after any contact with the rabbit, his cage, bowl, or droppings.
  - Consult your vet about vaccinations, tick and flea control and if you have any concerns about your rabbit's health.

Information above is adapted from:

- ▶ *Rabbits and Children.* House Rabbit Society.
- ▶ *A healthy pet is a safe pet.* PAWS. 1998



## Rodents – rats, mice, guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils etc:



- ▶ Children may be at risk from bites and scratches, so to reduce the risk of these:
  - Get advice about keeping rodents as pets.
  - Make sure your rodent is used to being handled.
  - **Supervise** children's contact with the pet rodent.
  - Teach children how to safely handle and treat the rodent.
  - Do not disturb sleeping rodents as they can be quite cranky when awakened!
  - Talk to your vet about grooming and claw trimming.
- ▶ If a child is bitten or scratched, wash the wound immediately and use disinfectant cream/solution. Always contact your GP if you are worried about a wound or if a wound is not healing properly.

### Infectious diseases which can be associated with pet rodents:

- ▶ Spread of diseases from rodents to humans is quite rare.
- ▶ Guinea pigs, mice and rats can be the source of intestinal illnesses such as salmonella, campylobacter, giardia and cryptosporidium.
- ▶ These diseases can be spread by contact with the droppings of an infected animal or by contact with something which has been contaminated with infected droppings.
- ▶ To reduce risk of infection:
  - Talk to your vet about what is needed to keep your rodent healthy and well.
  - Consult your vet if you have any concerns about your rodent's health.
  - Do not feed raw eggs or meat to your pet – uncooked eggs and meat can contain bacteria.
  - **Wash your hands carefully** after handling the animal, its droppings, bedding, cage, bowls, or toys – make sure your children do the same.
  - When choosing a pet rodent:
    - The pet should be lively and alert, with a glossy coat, free of droppings - don't pick one that is quiet, tired, has diarrhoea, or looks sickly.
    - The animal's breathing should be normal and there should be no discharge from the eyes or nose.
    - If one of the animals in the cage in a pet store has diarrhoea or looks sick, the others may have been exposed to an infectious disease, so do not choose any of these animals as your pet.
    - If your pet rodent dies, do not use the cage, toys, water/food bowls for a new pet until they have all been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.



#### Information above is adapted from:

- ▶ *Care of Pet Mice and Rats.* [www.hilltopanimalhospital.com](http://www.hilltopanimalhospital.com)
- ▶ *A healthy pet is a safe pet.* PAWS. 1998



## Where can I get more information?

Dublin Society for  
Prevention of Cruelty to  
Animals

[www.dspca.ie](http://www.dspca.ie)

The Kennel Club Safe and  
Sound Scheme

[www2.the-kennel-club.org.uk/](http://www2.the-kennel-club.org.uk/)

The Health Protection  
Surveillance Centre

[www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie)

For information about  
infectious diseases

Leaflets:  
"Stay safe around  
dogs"  
"Owning a dog"

[www.learnwithdogs.ie](http://www.learnwithdogs.ie)

Healthy pets – healthy  
people

[www.cdc.gov/healthypets](http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets)

Health Service Executive

[www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

American Society for  
Prevention of Cruelty to  
Animals

[www.asPCA.org](http://www.asPCA.org)

PAWS (Pets are a Wonderful Support)

[www.pawssf.org](http://www.pawssf.org)

For information about pets in an  
immuno-compromised household

County Councils

[www.laoiscoco.ie](http://www.laoiscoco.ie)

[www.longfordcoco.ie](http://www.longfordcoco.ie)

[www.offalycoco.ie](http://www.offalycoco.ie)

[www.westmeathcoco.ie](http://www.westmeathcoco.ie)

Visit the *environment section* and  
look under *veterinary service*,  
*animal control* or *animal welfare*.

Learn about Ticks

For information about ticks and about Lyme Disease

[www.tickbitepreventionweek.org](http://www.tickbitepreventionweek.org) (for child friendly  
material, look under "For Schools" section)

[www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie) (Look for *Lyme Disease* under *Topics A-Z*)

Pictures from [www.dreamstime.com](http://www.dreamstime.com):















*Happy pets collection.* Klara Viskova  
*Sad Dog.* Loisik  
*Handwashing.* G215  
*Active Family Lifestyle.* Wetnose1  
*Tick isolated on white.* Sergeytoronto  
*Curious Cartoon Dog.* Jsatt83.  
*Scary Black Cat.* Silvertiger  
*Glove White.* Krischam  
*Silver Tabby Cat Playing.* Julysun

*Cute Funny Cat.* Greenvalley  
*Turtle.* Le0nid  
*Parrot.* Pichayasri  
*Goldfish Cartoon.* Sifisd  
*Small Rabbit.* Photoredaktor  
*Hamster.* Nikola Pavlović  
*A Hamster.* Svetlanka809  
*Cork Board.* Robbiverte  
*Pen.* Polkan

## Staying Safe around Dogs



I promise that:

-  I will not disturb a sleeping dog.
-  I will not go near a dog whilst he is eating.
-  I will never tease or annoy a dog.
-  I will not go near a dog which is tied up.
-  I will not go near a dog which is guarding something.
-  I will tell an adult if a dog growls at me.
-  I will tell an adult if I see a dog which is not on his leash or not tied up.
-  I will not run or scream if a dog comes up to me.
-  I will stand still, like a statue, if a dog comes near me.
-  I will never stare into a dog's eyes.
-  I will always ask the owner's permission before I pet a dog.
-  I will always let the dog sniff the back of my closed hand before I pet it.
-  I will always be gentle when I am petting a dog.
-  I will never try to stop dogs from fighting.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Child

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian



## Washing your hands

**SUDS UP**  
**and AWAY!**

**1. Wet**



**2. Make Bubbles**



**3. Rinse**



**4. Dry**



Remember to make bubbles for as long as it takes you to sing the ABC song.

From [www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie)



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive



**Compiled by:**

Department of Public Health, HSE Area Office,  
Arden Road, Tullamore, Co. Offaly  
[public-health@hse.ie](mailto:public-health@hse.ie)

**With thanks to:**

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*The information in this booklet highlights some points and issues to be aware of for child safety and health around pets.*

*It is not intended to be fully comprehensive and information may be subject to change. Therefore please:*

- › *Talk to a health professional if you have any specific concerns or queries about your own safety and health or that of your child's.*
- › *Talk to your vet if you have any concerns about your pet's health or welfare.*