

Reptiles and Turtles and Infectious Diseases

What you can do to protect yourself and your family

Reptiles (turtles, snakes, lizards) are popular pets, especially among children. However they carry a range of potentially very dangerous bugs so must be handled carefully. People most at risk of developing illness include babies and small children, pregnant women, the elderly and people with serious disease such as cancer. The most worrying diseases carried by reptiles are:

Salmonella: these bacteria are commonly found in the faeces of all reptiles and can easily spread to humans. *Salmonella* infection causes diarrhoea, headache, fever and stomach cramps and can result in blood poisoning.

Botulism: is a serious (and potentially fatal) disease caused by a toxin released by the *Clostridium* bacterium carried by turtles and other reptiles. It can cause paralysis and death. *Clostridium* spores are found in the environment and reptiles such as turtles swallow the spores when feeding. They then excrete the spores in their faeces. *Clostridium* is extremely dangerous to children under the age of one as they have not developed the defence systems to protect themselves. There have been two cases of botulism in small babies linked to yellow bellied turtles in Ireland.

As a result, HPSC advises that reptiles (especially turtles) are **not appropriate pets for small children and should NOT be kept in households in which there are children under the age of five**. In addition, if you own turtles and you visit a household in which there are

children under five (and most especially households with infants under the age of one), you should wash your hands immediately after contact with turtles or their water and again on entering the house in which there are small children.

Reptiles/turtles carry other potentially serious infections. The risk for most people keeping reptiles is low, as long as proper hygiene is maintained.

If you keep reptiles or turtles in your house, follow the advice below to minimise the risk of infection:

- **Reptiles should not be kept as pets in households with children under the age of five – under ANY circumstances**
- **All reptiles should be considered to be infected**
- **The following people should avoid all contact with reptiles: Pregnant women, elderly or frail adults or immunosuppressed people** (e.g. people with cancer, HIV/AIDS, who have recently had a transplant or are on immunosuppressive therapy)
- **Reptiles must never be allowed into kitchens or areas where there is food**

Always WASH YOUR HANDS with hot, soapy water

- After handling your reptile.
- After touching reptile tanks and equipment, reptile food and reptile faeces.
- Before leaving your house and **before visiting families with small children**



Remember:

- **Reptiles are NOT appropriate pets in child-care facilities or crèches**
- Confine your reptile to its tank or cage,
- Wash with hot water any surfaces with which your reptile has had contact.
- Wash your reptile in its own basin (never the bath/sink)
- Wear disposable gloves when cleaning tanks, cages, or equipment.
- Dispose of waste water/faeces in the toilet or outside drain
- When handling reptiles, their tanks or equipment do not eat, drink, or smoke
- Wash all clothes that have been in contact with your reptile.
- Older children must wash their hands immediately after handling the reptile
- Follow expert advice on feeding and welfare (e.g. environment) to reduce stress.
- Ask your local vet or specialist reptile vet for further information on reptiles.
- Further useful information can be obtained from HPSC (<http://www.hpsc.ie/hpsc/A-Z/Zoonotic/ReptilesandRisksofInfectiousDiseases>)