Turtles and Salmonella Risk

Turtles and other reptiles are reservoirs of salmonella and have long been a recognized source of salmonella infections in humans. Small turtles have posed a particular danger to young children because these turtles might not be perceived as health hazards and can be handled like toys. Small turtles may be cute, but they can also be deadly. That is the message health experts wish to convey to families with children under age 5 who might be considering small turtles as pets.

While the sale of these small turtles for educational purposes in schools is legal, the tiny reptiles do not make appropriate pets in the homes of young children, according to the Food and Drug Administration. Small children and people with suppressed immunity are more likely to become sick from salmonella, the bacteria harbored by the turtles.

In the 1970’s, small turtles caused major health issues, accounting for 100,000 salmonella cases. A government ban on the sale of turtles with shells smaller than 4 inches in diameter as pets has prevented at least 100,000 salmonella cases annually, according to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention. However, because the prohibition is not fully enforced and contains exceptions for educational purposes, human turtle-associated cases of salmonella continue to occur. Salmonella infections in children can be severe and can result in hospitalization and occasionally death as was the case in March of 2007 when a 3-week-old infant died of salmonella.

"These little turtles are not appropriate pets for young children,” said Larry K. Pickering, MD, FAAP, editor of an American Academy of Pediatrics’ book of infectious diseases, Red Book. He advises those with small children to remove the turtles from the home.

Parents and caregivers with turtles and other reptiles in the house are advised to assume that all reptiles can expose children to salmonella and should follow safety precautions while handling the creatures, including:

- avoiding changing the creatures’ water in the kitchen sink or around food preparation areas;
- preventing children from kissing the reptiles or putting their hands in their mouths after handling them; and
- washing children’s hands thoroughly with warm soapy water after contact with any animals or animal products.

Some breeders and pet shops sell reptiles that they claim are salmonella-free. However, reptiles can become re-infected with salmonella from the environment fairly easily. “Turtles are salmonella factories,” Dr. Pickering said. “All reptiles basically carry salmonella. You have to assume if you see a turtle that it’s got salmonella in its intestines.”

The preceding information was provided by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.