

Small turtles dangerous pet choice for children

They may be cute, but they also can be deadly. That's the message health experts wish to convey to families with children under age 5 who might be considering small turtles as pets.

While 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 1970s, the 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 100,00 salmonella cases annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"These little turtles are not appropriate pets for young children," said Larry K. Pickering, M.D., 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 product.

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, said Dr. Pickering.

"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."

-Trisha Koriath
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