

FDA Re-Emphasizes Warnings to Consumers on Risks of Pet Turtles

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is urgently reminding the public that contact with baby turtles can pose a serious health risk to infants, small children, and adults with impaired immune systems as they can be natural hosts to *Salmonella*, a group of bacteria that can cause severe illness and death. Recently, a four-week old infant in Florida died of infection traced to *Salmonella pomona*, a bacteria that was also found in a pet turtle in the home.

Salmonella is the genus name of a number of bacteria commonly associated with food poisoning from contaminated or undercooked foods, and salmonellosis is the disease the bacteria can cause. *Salmonella* can be found on the outer skin and shell surfaces of the turtles causing salmonellosis for those handling turtles without properly washing their hands after handling the animals.

FDA is reminding parents and others who care for children of the following:

- The sale of turtles with a shell less than four inches long is illegal. Exceptions to FDA's regulation include sales of these turtles intended for export only or for bona fide scientific, educational, or exhibitional purpose;
- *Salmonella* infection can be caused by contact with turtles in petting zoos, parks, child day care facilities and other locations; and
- It is important to wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after handling or touching turtles and their housing.

In the early 1970's, it was determined that pet turtles, particularly red-eared sliders, were responsible for an estimated 280,000 cases of salmonellosis each year in the United States. In 1975, FDA banned the sale of turtles with a shell less than four inches long as a necessary public health measure. FDA has repeatedly emphasized the risks of turtle-associated salmonellosis because of a resurgence in the sales of such turtles in the last four years. The public health impact of turtle-associated salmonellosis in humans is an estimated 74,000 cases in the United States per year.

Salmonella infection can be transmitted either directly from contact with the turtle or its feces, or indirectly through the animal's water. Turtles with *Salmonella* usually do not appear to be sick. Their feces do not always contain the bacteria, therefore a single negative test does not prove they are *Salmonella*-free.

Although anyone can acquire a salmonellosis infection, the risk is highest in infants, young children, the elderly, and others with lowered natural resistance to disease. Pregnancy, cancer, chemotherapy, organ transplant, diabetes, and liver problems pose particular risks. Gastrointestinal symptoms following *Salmonella* exposure begin in 6 to 72 hours (usually 12 to 36 hours) and generally last for two to seven days.

For more information on FDA's regulation of turtles, please see the following:

<http://www.fda.gov/cvm/turtlereg.htm>.