

Salmonella Typhimurium Infections Associated with Small Pet Turtles

DATE:	2/24/2021
TO:	Health Alert Network
FROM:	Alison V. Beam, JD, Acting Secretary of Health
SUBJECT:	Salmonella Typhimurium Infections Associated with Small Pet Turtles
DISTRIBUTION:	Southeastern PA
LOCATION:	n/a
STREET ADDRESS:	n/a
COUNTY:	n/a
MUNICIPALITY:	n/a
ZIP CODE:	n/a

This transmission is a “Health Advisory”: provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

HOSPITALS: PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, PEDIATRIC, NURSING AND LABORATORY STAFF IN YOUR HOSPITAL; **EMS COUNCILS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; **FQHCs:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE **LOCAL HEALTH JURISDICTIONS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE TO YOUR MEMBERSHIP; **LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES:** PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, INFECTION CONTROL, AND NURSING STAFF IN YOUR FACILITY

- The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) and the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) are participating in a multistate outbreak investigation of *Salmonella* Typhimurium associated with small pet turtles.
- Most *Salmonella* infections in this outbreak have occurred in southeastern Pennsylvania.
- Most *Salmonella* infections in this outbreak have occurred among children.
- Of the known turtle exposures, all have been small pet turtles purchased from roadside or street vendors.
- If you have questions about this guidance, please call your local health department or 1-877-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258).

The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) and the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) are participating in a multistate outbreak investigation of *Salmonella* Typhimurium associated with small pet turtles. An investigation notice has been posted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Tuesday, February 23, 2021: <https://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/typhimurium-02-21/index.html>.

There are nine laboratory-confirmed *Salmonella* Typhimurium infections among Pennsylvania residents in this outbreak. Eight (89%) of these infections have occurred among people living in Philadelphia County or Delaware County. There was one adult death for which salmonellosis was one of the contributing factors.

Most (78%) *Salmonella* infections occurred among children, ranging from ages 0-10 years old.

Salmonellosis is a serious infection of the gastrointestinal tract. Diarrhea is the most common symptom of *Salmonella* infection, but other symptoms such as fever, headache, nausea, and vomiting can also occur. In addition, salmonellosis can cause severe illness (e.g., bloodstream infection, bone and joint infection, meningitis) and can be particularly serious for young children, the elderly, and persons with weak immune systems. DOH recommends that families with those at higher risk of invasive disease should avoid keeping turtles as pets.

Healthy turtles, as well as other reptiles, are known to carry *Salmonella* as part of their normal intestinal flora and intermittently shed the bacteria in their feces throughout their lifespan. Humans can become infected with *Salmonella* through direct contact with turtles, turtle habitats (e.g., tank water), and through indirect contact by cross-contamination of objects and surfaces.

Of the four people who reported the species of turtle in their home, all four were small red-eared sliders. Of the four people who reported where they obtained their turtle, all four were transient street or roadside vendors. Three of the reported vendors were in Philadelphia.

Since 1975, it has been illegal in the United States to sell or distribute turtles with shells that measure less than 4 inches in length. This size was chosen because small children are more likely to treat smaller turtles as toys and put them in their mouths. The ban by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has prevented an estimated 100,000 cases of Salmonellosis each year in children. Despite this ban, such turtles are available from pet stores, flea markets, street vendors, and online stores.

DOH requests that healthcare providers maintain a high index of suspicion for salmonellosis presenting with clinically compatible symptoms, especially children and/or families with small pet turtles in their homes. Report suspicious cases and laboratory-confirmed *Salmonella* infections to your local health department or at 1-877-PA-HEALTH (877-724-3258).

For families that own turtles, healthcare providers should review routine precautions to prevent the spread of *Salmonella*, including:

- Always wash hands with soap and water after handling turtles or changing water in the tank.
- Do not allow turtles in kitchen, dining room, or any area in which food is prepared and consumed. Also, do not allow turtles in bathroom sinks, tubs, or any area where infants are bathed.
- Do not eat, drink, or smoke while handling turtles.
- Do not kiss or snuggle turtles.
- Those at high risk of invasive disease (e.g., children less than 5 years of age, the elderly, pregnant women, and immunocompromised persons) should avoid contact with turtles.

Additional information about *Salmonella* in small pet turtles is available at <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/publications/trouble-with-tiny-turtles.html>.

Do not release unwanted turtles. Some species, including red-eared sliders, are invasive species in Pennsylvania. Instead, call your local reputable pet store or a reptile rescue.

If you have questions about this guidance, please call your local health department or **1-877-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258)**.

Individuals interested in receiving further PA-HANs are encouraged to register at <https://han.pa.gov/>.

Categories of Health Alert messages:

Health Alert: conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

Health Advisory: provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

Health Update: provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

This information is current as of February 24, 2021 but may be modified in the future. We will continue to post updated information regarding the most common questions about this subject.