



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY
Health Department

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Salmonella cases in Lewis and Clark County have been linked to pet reptiles

Helena – In the last year, at least four laboratory-confirmed cases of *Salmonella* infection in Lewis and Clark County have been attributed to pet turtles.

Salmonella bacteria live in the intestinal tracts of animals such as reptiles (turtles, lizards, snakes, iguanas), amphibians (frogs, salamanders), livestock (cows, pigs, sheep, goats), rodents (hamsters, mice) and birds. For most of these animals, having *Salmonella* does not make the animal sick. Reptiles are particularly likely to harbor *Salmonella* and may shed large numbers of bacteria. Baby chicks and birds can also shed a large volume of *Salmonella* bacteria.

A person can pick up bacteria on their hands just by touching the animals or their habitat. If the person then touches the mouth or food, *Salmonella* may be ingested, and cause an infection. “Animals are delightful additions to our lives,” said Laurel Riek, Environmental Health Specialist for Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department, “But we need to take precautions to protect our families and ourselves from potential disease. Handling reptiles can land a small child in the hospital.”

Salmonella infection causes diarrhea, fever, and abdominal cramps that begin 12 to 72 hours after ingestion of the bacteria. The illness usually lasts 4 to 7 days, and most people recover without treatment. However, *Salmonella* can cause severe illness requiring hospitalization, and even death. The elderly, infants, and those with impaired immune systems are more likely to have a severe illness.

To reduce the risk of *Salmonella* illness associated with reptiles, the health department recommends the following precautions:

- Reptiles, (including turtles) are not appropriate pets for small children. Keep reptiles out of homes with children under 5 years old, the elderly, or people with weakened immune systems.
- Do not allow reptiles to roam freely through the house, especially through food preparation areas.
- Do not clean tanks or other supplies in the kitchen sink. Use bleach to disinfect the place where reptile habitats are cleaned.
- Always wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after touching any reptiles, their housing, or anything (for example, food) that comes in contact with a reptile or its housing.

“Always wash your hands after enjoying the animals. Remember to disinfect areas that are used for cleaning habitats,” Riek advises. For more information on disease from animals, call Laurel Riek at **447-8361** or visit www.cdc.gov.

The Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department’s mission is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis & Clark County residents.

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