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Update on Multistate Outbreak of *Salmonella* Typhimurium Infections Linked to Small Pet Turtles

June 21, 2021 – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has announced that 11 more illness cases have been added to the agency’s investigation of a multistate occurrence of human *Salmonella* Typhimurium infections linked to contact with small pet turtles. In addition, CDC has identified a second, separate outbreak of *Salmonella* Poona infections also linked to small turtles.

Forty-two cases of human *Salmonella* Typhimurium infections and 22 cases of human *Salmonella* Poona cases have been reported in 17 states and the District of Columbia between August 27, 2020, and May 23, 2021. Of people interviewed, 37 reported contact with pet turtles before becoming ill. The ages of those infected range from less than one year to 59, with a median age of six. Twenty-six people have been hospitalized; there has been one death reported from Pennsylvania. Ill people reported buying small pet turtles from flea markets, roadside vendors and pet stores. Twenty-five people remembered the size of their turtle, and 21 of them reported contact with turtles whose shells were less than four inches long.

For the *Salmonella* Typhimurium outbreak, some ill people reported contact with turtles smaller than four inches that were purchased from pet stores. Two pet stores reported their turtles were supplied by Turtles and Tortoises Inc., a turtle farm in Florida. This farm may not be the sole source of all the illnesses in the outbreak. Local and state health officials in Pennsylvania collected samples from ill people’s turtles and turtle habitats for testing and identified the outbreak strain of *Salmonella* Typhimurium.

For the *Salmonella* Poona outbreak, CDC and partners are working to determine the source or sources of the turtles causing illness. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health and Orange County Health Care Agency in California collected samples from ill people’s turtles and turtle habitats for testing. Testing identified the outbreak strain of *Salmonella* Poona.

Previous *Salmonella* outbreaks have been linked to turtles with a shell length less than four inches. The Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC) reminds businesses and consumers that federal law¹ prohibits the sale of turtles with a shell length of less than four inches as pets. Consumers should not buy small turtles with shells less than four inches long, and should only purchase pets from reputable pet retailers or breeders.

All turtles, regardless of size, can carry *Salmonella* bacteria even if they appear healthy and clean. Animals with *Salmonella* shed the bacteria in their droppings. These germs can then spread to their

¹ Code of Federal Regulations:
<https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cdrh/cfdocs/cfcfr/CFRSearch.cfm?fr=1240.62&SearchTerm=turtles%5d>

bodies, tank water and anything in the area where they live and roam. People can become infected if they do not wash their hands after contact with animals carrying *Salmonella*, or their environments.

Most people infected with *Salmonella* develop diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramps between six hours and six days after infection. Children under the age of five, adults over the age of 65 and individuals with weakened immune systems have a greater risk of infection and severe illness. The illness usually lasts four to seven days, and most individuals recover without treatment. However, in some cases, the illness may be so severe that a person requires hospitalization.

The CDC, PIJAC and other expert sources recommend these precautions to protect yourself and others from contact with *Salmonella* bacteria that turtles may carry:

- Supervise children’s interactions with the animal, including post-encounter hand-washing.
- Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with water and soap right after touching the animal or anything in the area where they live, including after handling pet food and treats, cleaning cages or tanks, or picking up toys or bedding.
- Do not let the animal into areas where food is prepared, served, or stored.
- Do not snuggle or kiss the animal, or touch your mouth, eat or drink around them.
- To prevent cross-contamination, avoid cleaning habitats, toys and pet supplies in areas where food is prepared, served or stored.
- If you are thinking of getting a pet turtle:
 - Do not buy small turtles with shells less than four inches long. Federal law² prohibits the sale of these small turtles. However, many people in this outbreak had contact with small turtles. Small turtles are sometimes sold illegally as pets at flea markets, roadside stands and stores.
 - Purchase or adopt pet turtles from reputable pet retailers, breeders or pet rescues. Reputable pet retailers, breeders and rescues do not sell small turtles with shells less than four inches long.
 - Ask the retailer, breeder or rescue if they have any tips on how to stay healthy around pet turtles and prevent getting sick from *Salmonella*.
 - Pick the right pet for your family. Pet turtles are not recommended for households with people at higher risk of getting severely ill. Consider picking a different pet if your household has someone who is younger than five, aged 65 or older, or has a weakened immune system.

Pet retailers are strongly encouraged to provide information on disease risk and prevention measures to consumers purchasing reptiles. Such information includes the “Healthy Herp Handling” poster, which can be found listed in the resources below.

Resources:

- CDC investigation notice: <https://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/typhimurium-02-21/index.html>
- CDC information on *Salmonella*: <https://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/index.html>
- CDC Stay Healthy Around Pet Reptiles and Amphibians: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/resources/safety-around-reptiles-H.pdf>

² Code of Federal Regulations: <https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cdrh/cfdocs/cfcfr/CFRSearch.cfm?fr=1240.62&SearchTerm=turtles%5d>

- CDC The Trouble with Tiny Turtles: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/publications/trouble-with-tiny-turtles.html>
- CDC Information on Healthy Pets and Healthy People: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/index.html>
- PIJAC Healthy Herp Handling poster: <https://pijac.org/HealthyHerpHandling>
- PIJAC flyer containing information on *Salmonella* for retailers: <https://pijac.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/FLYERSalmonellosis071117.pdf>
- PIJAC Introduction to Aquatic Turtle Care: <https://pijac.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/care%20sheets/aquaticturtlecaresheet122117.pdf>
- PIJAC website updates on this outbreak and other zoonotic issues: <https://pijac.org/animal-welfare-and-programs/zoonotic-disease-prevention>