Salmonella and Reptiles

Reptiles (iguanas, snakes, lizards, and turtles) are capable of spreading the Salmonella bacteria to persons who have either direct or indirect contact with the pets. The resulting disease, referred to as Salmonellosis, can cause slight illness in some, but severe life-threatening conditions in others. The most severe complications of Salmonella infections occur primarily in infants, young children under the age of five, and immunocompromised persons.

There are a number of precautions one may take to prevent the spread of Salmonella from reptiles to humans. These include the following:

1. Confine reptiles to a cage or aquarium. If the reptile runs loose, fecal material will inevitably be deposited throughout the home. As other members of the home come into contact with the material, they may become infected.
2. Do not eat or drink near the reptile cage, or while handling this animal or its cage.
3. Do not wash reptiles or reptile dishes, cages, or aquariums in kitchen area.
4. After each contact with a reptile or its cage litter, wash hands thoroughly with soap and water.
5. As reptiles present a special danger to infants, young children under five, pregnant women, new mothers, as well as people with weakened immune systems, these persons should avoid all contact with reptiles or cage litter.

Reptiles remain popular pets in the United States; during 1991--2001, the estimated number of households with reptiles doubled from approximately 850,000 to 1.7 million (7). The increase in pet reptile popularity has been paralleled by an increase in the number of reptile-related Salmonella serotypes isolated from humans (2,6). December 12, 2003 / 52(49); 1206-1209 MMWR Weekly. The public must be educated regarding the connection between reptiles and Salmonella so that they may take the proper measures in order to prevent any further contamination.