

Salmonella Outbreak Linked to Small Turtles



Investigation Notice

Updated November 16, 2022

This outbreak investigation is over. Turtles of any size can carry *Salmonella* germs that can spread to you and make you sick. Don't buy turtles with shells less than 4 inches long, and always take steps to stay healthy around your pet turtles.

Fast Facts

- Illnesses: 28
- Hospitalizations: 10
- Deaths: 0
- [States](#): 16
- Investigation status: Closed

Turtles and *Salmonella*

A federal law bans the sale and distribution of turtles with shells less than 4 inches long as pets because they have caused many illnesses. However, these turtles can sometimes be found illegally online and at stores, flea markets, and roadside stands.

Pet turtles of any size can carry *Salmonella* germs in their droppings even if they look healthy and clean. These germs can easily spread to their bodies, tank water, and anything in the area where they live and roam.

You can get sick from touching a turtle or anything in its environment and then touching your mouth or food with unwashed hands and swallowing *Salmonella* germs.

CDC continues to advise people not to buy small turtles with shells less than 4 inches long, including from online retailers such as myturtlestore.com.

What You Should Do

If you are thinking of getting a pet turtle:

- **Only buy turtles with shells longer than 4 inches and buy them from a reputable pet store**
 - Reputable pet stores do not sell turtles with shells less than 4 inches long.
- **Pick the right pet for your family**
 - Pet turtles are not recommended for children younger than 5, adults aged 65 and older, and people with weakened immune systems. These people are more likely to get a serious illness from germs that turtles can carry.

Always take these steps to [stay healthy around your pet turtle](#):

- **Wash your hands**
 - Always wash hands thoroughly with soap and water right after touching or feeding your turtle and after touching or cleaning the area where it lives and roams.
 - Adults should make sure young children are washing their hands properly.
- **Play safely**
 - Don't kiss or snuggle your turtle, and don't eat or drink around it. This can spread *Salmonella* germs to your mouth and make you sick.
 - Keep your turtle out of your kitchen and other areas where you eat, store, or prepare food.
- **Keep things clean**
 - Clean your turtle supplies outside the house, if possible. These supplies may include its tank, toys, and feeders.
 - If you clean the supplies indoors, don't clean them in the kitchen or other areas where you eat or prepare food. Use a laundry sink or bathtub, and thoroughly clean and disinfect the area right after.

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any of these severe *Salmonella* symptoms:

- Diarrhea and a fever higher than 102°F
- Diarrhea for more than 3 days that is not improving
- Bloody diarrhea
- So much vomiting that you cannot keep liquids down
- Signs of dehydration, such as:

- Not peeing much
- Dry mouth and throat
- Feeling dizzy when standing up

If you decide pet turtles are not the right fit for your family:

- **Don't release your turtle outside**

- Call your local reptile rescue, animal shelter, or pet store about options for safely rehoming your turtle.
- Releasing pets into the wild can disrupt wildlife and may be prohibited by law in certain states.

What Businesses Should Do

- **Do not sell or distribute turtles with shells less than 4 inches long.**
 - A [federal law](#) bans the sale and distribution of these turtles as pets.
- **Educate customers** about how to stay healthy around turtles.
 - This [poster](#) provides information on how to stay healthy around turtles.
 - Consider putting the poster right by the turtle area and giving a copy to customers who are buying them.
- **Learn more** about how to protect your customers and employees from *Salmonella* and other diseases shared between animals and humans.
 - Read [A Compendium of Measures to Prevent Zoonotic Diseases Associated with Non-Traditional Pets](#).

Symptoms of *Salmonella*

- Most people infected with *Salmonella* experience diarrhea, fever, and stomach cramps.
 - Symptoms usually start 6 hours to 6 days after swallowing the bacteria.
 - Most people recover without treatment after 4 to 7 days.
- Some people – especially children younger than 5 years, adults 65 years and older, and people with weakened immune systems – may experience more severe illnesses that require medical treatment or hospitalization.

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November 16, 2022

CDC and public health officials in several states investigated a multistate outbreak of *Salmonella* Stanley and *Salmonella* Pomona infections.

Epidemiologic, laboratory, and traceback data showed that contact with small turtles made people sick.

As of November 16, 2022, this outbreak investigation is over.

Epidemiologic Data

A total of 28 people infected with the outbreak strain of *Salmonella* Stanley (25 people) or *Salmonella* Pomona (3 people) were reported from 16 states (see [map](#)). Illnesses started on dates ranging from September 17, 2021, to September 12, 2022 (see [timeline](#)).

Sick people ranged in age from less than 1 to 75 years, with a median age of 10, and 6 (21%) people were children under the age of 5. Of 27 sick people with sex information available, 13 (48%) were female. Of 23 people with healthcare information available, 10 (43%) were hospitalized. No deaths were reported.

The true number of sick people in this outbreak is likely much higher than the number reported, and this outbreak may not have been limited to the states with known illnesses. This is because many people recover without medical care and are not tested for *Salmonella*.

State and local public health officials interviewed people about the animals they came into contact with in the week before they got sick. Of the 20 people who provided this information, 15 (75%) reported contact with pet

turtles. Of the 14 people who reported the size of the pet turtle, all 14 (100%) reported contact with pet turtles with shells less than 4 inches long.

Laboratory and Traceback Data

Public health investigators used the [PulseNet](#) system to identify illnesses that were part of this outbreak. CDC PulseNet manages a national database of DNA fingerprints of bacteria that cause gastrointestinal illnesses. DNA fingerprinting is performed on bacteria using a method called [whole genome sequencing \(WGS\)](#).

WGS showed that bacteria from sick people's samples were closely related genetically. This means that people in this outbreak likely got sick from the same type of animal.

On May 9, 2022, the Tennessee Department of Health collected samples from two small turtles in a sick person's home for testing. These turtles were purchased from myturtlestore.com. WGS showed that the *Salmonella* on the turtles and their environment are closely related to bacteria from sick people.

On July 20, 2022, the Florida Department of Health collected samples from turtles and their environments from the myturtlestore.com facility. WGS showed that *Salmonella* found on the turtles are closely related to bacteria from sick people.

[WGS analysis](#) of bacteria from 27 people's samples, 5 turtle samples, and 6 environmental samples did not predict resistance to any antibiotics. Standard [antibiotic susceptibility testing](#) by CDC's [National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System \(NARMS\)](#) laboratory of bacteria from one person's sample and one environmental sample also found no resistance.

Of the 13 people interviewed about where they purchased their small pet turtles, 9 (69%) people reported purchasing them from online retailers. Six (67%) of these 9 reported purchasing their small pet turtles from a website called myturtlestore.com.

Public Health Actions

CDC advises that you always take steps to [stay healthy around your pet turtle](#): wash your hands, play safely, and keep supplies and the pet area clean. Do not buy small turtles with shells less than 4 inches long, including from online retailers such as myturtlestore.com.