

Salmonella Outbreak Linked to Small Turtles



Investigation Notice

Posted September 29, 2023

Public health officials are investigating multiple outbreaks of *Salmonella* linked to small turtles. Almost 40 percent of people are children younger than 5 years. Always take steps to stay healthy around your small turtles.

Fast Facts

- Illnesses: 59 (33 new)
- Hospitalizations: 23 (14 new)
- Deaths: 0
- [States](#): 18 (7 new)
- Investigation status: Active (first posted on August 18, 2023)

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, especially in young children. Despite the ban, these turtles can sometimes be sold illegally online and at stores, flea markets, or roadside stands. They are also sometimes given out as prizes at carnivals or fairs.

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.

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**
 - All pet turtles, including those with shells longer than 4 inches, are not recommended for children younger than 5, adults aged 65 and older, or people with weakened immune systems. These people are more likely to get a serious illness from germs that turtles can carry.
 - Some people in this outbreak have become ill from turtles that were given to them as gifts. Before giving pet turtles as gifts, discuss with the person or their caregivers. Raising pets is a commitment people need to be ready for and some pets may not be right for every family.

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**
 - Use a wash tub and sponge or scrub that are just used for your pet.
 - You can also use a laundry sink or bathtub, but make sure to remove people's items from the sink and tub before cleaning pet items. Then thoroughly [clean and disinfect](#) the sink or tub immediately after.

- Using a kitchen sink may spread germs to your food. If the kitchen sink is the only place you can clean pet items, thoroughly clean and disinfect the sink and the area around the sink immediately after.

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 finding a new home for your turtle.
- Releasing pets into the wild can disrupt wildlife and may be prohibited by law in certain states.

Call a 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

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.
 - Do not give small turtles out as prizes. Some people have become sick in this outbreak after winning their small turtle at a carnival or fair.
- **Educate customers about how to stay healthy around turtles.**
 - This [poster \[PDF – 1 page\]](#) 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 turtles.
- **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.

Investigation Details

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CDC and public health officials in several states are investigating multistate outbreaks of *Salmonella* Stanley, *Salmonella* Pomona, and *Salmonella* Poona infections.

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

Epidemiologic Data

Since the last update on August 18, 33 new illnesses and one new serotype, *Salmonella* Poona, have been reported. A total of 59 people infected with the outbreak strains of *Salmonella* Stanley (30 people), *Salmonella* Pomona (3 people), or *Salmonella* Poona (26 people) were reported from 18 states (see [map](#)). Illnesses started on dates ranging from October 27, 2022, to August 26, 2023 (see [timeline](#)).

The true number of sick people in an outbreak is likely much higher than the number reported, and this outbreak may not be limited to the states with known illnesses. This is because many people recover without medical care

and are not tested for *Salmonella*. In addition, recent illnesses may not yet be reported as it usually takes 3 to 4 weeks to determine if a sick person is part of an outbreak.

Public health officials collect many different types of information from sick people, including their age, race, ethnicity, other demographics, and the foods they ate in the week before they got sick. This information provides clues to help investigators identify the source of the outbreak. The table below has information about sick people in this outbreak (“n” is the number of people with information available for each demographic).

Table of demographic information (n is the number of people with information available)

Demographics	Information
Age (n=59)	Range from <1 to 90 years Median age of 7 39% under 5 years
Sex (n=59)	53% female 47% male
Race (n=41)	68% White 27% African American or Black 2% Asian 2% Native American or Alaska Native
Ethnicity* (n=50)	74% non-Hispanic 26% Hispanic

*Ethnicity by *Salmonella* serotype: *Salmonella* Poona (n=20 cases with information available) 50% report Hispanic ethnicity; *Salmonella* Stanley and Pomona (n=30 cases with information available) 10% report Hispanic ethnicity.

State and local public health officials interviewed people about the animals they had contact with in the week before they got sick. Of the 46 people who provided this information, 33 (72%) reported contact with pet turtles. Of the 26 people who reported the size of the pet turtle, 26 (100%) reported contact with pet turtles with shells less than 4 inches long.

Twenty-seven people provided information about where they obtained their pet turtle: 7 (26%) people reported purchasing their pet turtles from online retailers, 6 (22%) people reported buying their turtle from stores, 6 (22%) people reported buying their turtle from a roadside stand or flea market, 4 (15%) people reported receiving their turtle as a gift, and 1 person each reported getting their turtles at a reptile show, swap meet, finding their turtle in a park, or winning their turtle at a carnival (15%).

Laboratory Data

Whole genome sequencing (WGS) showed that bacteria from sick people's samples are closely related genetically. This means that people in this outbreak likely got sick from the same type of animal. Bacteria from this outbreak of *Salmonella* serotypes Stanley and Pomona is closely related to a previous outbreak of [Salmonella illnesses linked to small turtles](#).

In August 2023, samples were collected from a sick person's turtle in Washington State for testing. This turtle was purchased at a flea market. WGS performed by the Washington State Public Health Laboratories showed that the *Salmonella* serotype Poona from the turtle and its environment are closely related to the bacteria from sick people.

[WGS analysis](#) of bacteria from 57 people's samples, 3 animal samples, and 2 environmental samples did not predict resistance to any antibiotics. Standard [antibiotic susceptibility testing](#) by CDC's [National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System \(NARMS\)](#) laboratory is currently under way.