

Salmonella Outbreak Linked to Small Turtles



Investigation Notice

Posted August 18, 2023

Public health officials are investigating a multistate outbreak of *Salmonella* linked to small turtles. Although any turtle can carry *Salmonella* germs that can spread to you and make you sick, turtles with shells less than 4 inches long are a known source of illness. Always take steps to stay healthy around your small turtles.

Fast Facts

- Illnesses: 26
- Hospitalizations: 9
- Deaths: 0
- [States](#): 11
- Investigation status: Active

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 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.

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, or 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**
 - 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.
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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.

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

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 \[PDF – 1 page\]](#) 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 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.
- For more information about *Salmonella*, see [the *Salmonella* Questions and Answers page](#).

Investigation Details

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

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

Epidemiologic Data

A total of 26 people infected with the outbreak strain of *Salmonella* Stanley (24 people) or *Salmonella* Pomona (2 people) were reported from 11 states. Illnesses started on dates ranging from October 27, 2022, to July 16, 2023.

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=26)	Range from <1 to 64 years Median age of 14 31% under 5 years
Sex (n=26)	42% female 58% male
Race (n=22)	68% White 27% African American/Black 5% Asian 0% Native American or Alaska Native 0% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander 0% reported more than one race
Ethnicity (n=24)	88% non-Hispanic 13% Hispanic

State and local public health officials interviewed people about the animals they had contact with in the week before they got sick. Of the 20 people who provided this information, 16 (80%) reported contact with pet turtles. Of the 13 people who reported the size of the pet turtle, 12 (92%) reported contact with pet turtles with shells less than 4 inches long.

Laboratory and Traceback Data

Public health investigators are using the [PulseNet](#) system to identify illnesses that may be 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 are closely related genetically. This means that people in this outbreak likely got sick from the same type of animal.

In July 2023, the Tennessee Department of Health collected samples from two turtles and their tank in a sick person's home for testing. These turtles were purchased from a pet store. WGS showed that the *Salmonella* on the turtles and their environment are closely related to bacteria from sick people.

[WGS analysis](#) of bacteria from 26 people's samples, 3 animal samples, and 1 environmental sample did not predict resistance to any antibiotics.

Standard [antibiotic susceptibility testing](#) of five people's samples by CDC's [National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System \(NARMS\)](#) laboratory also found no resistance.

Thirteen people were interviewed about where they purchased their pet turtle: 6 (46%) people reported purchasing their pet turtles from online retailers, 5 (38%) people reported buying their turtle from stores, and 1 (8%) person reported buying their turtle from a reptile show. Investigators are working to determine if there is a common source of turtles.

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.