

Salmonella Outbreaks Linked to Small Turtles



Investigation Notice

Posted August 16, 2024

Public health officials are investigating multistate outbreaks 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: 51
- Hospitalizations: 23
- Deaths: 0
- [States](#): 21
- Investigation status: Active (first posted on August 16, 2024)

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 are sometimes still sold illegally online, 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 and its tank or other items.
- 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 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.
 - Many states have additional laws about the sale of turtles as pets.
- **Educate customers about how to stay healthy around turtles.**
 - [Learn more](#) information on how to stay healthy around turtles.
 - Consider putting these stickers right by the turtle area and giving a copy to customers who are buying them.
 - [Always Wash Your Hands After Touching, Feeding, Or Playing With Your Pet Reptile](#)
 - [Don't Buy Turtles With Shells Less Than 4 Inches Long](#)
 - [Turtles Aren't Right For Every Family](#)
- **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

August 16, 2024

CDC and public health officials in several states are collecting [different types of data](#) to investigate multistate outbreaks of *Salmonella* Stanley and *Salmonella* Poona infections.

Epidemiologic, laboratory, and traceback data show that contact with small turtles is making people sick.

Epidemiologic Data

A total of 51 people infected with one of the outbreak strains of *Salmonella* has been reported from 21 states (see [map](#)). Of these reported illnesses, 38 people were infected with the *Salmonella* Stanley strain and 13 people with the *Salmonella* Poona strain. Illnesses started on dates ranging from August 20, 2023, to July 9, 2024 (see [timeline](#)). Of 48 people with information available, 23 (48%) have been hospitalized and no deaths have been reported.

The true number of sick people in an outbreak is likely much higher than the number reported, and the 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 animals they came into contact within 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 these outbreaks (“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=51)	Range from <1 to 78 years Median age of 8 years 35% under 5 years 20% ≤1 year
Sex (n=51)	53% female 47% male
Race (n=42)	52% White 45% African American/Black 2% Asian

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

Demographics	Information
Ethnicity* (n=43)	60% non-Hispanic 40% Hispanic

*The Poona Outbreak has higher proportions of children (46% are children one year or younger) and people who identified as Hispanic (67%).

State and local public health officials are interviewing people about the animals they came into contact with the week before they got sick. Of the 41 people interviewed, 27 (66%) reported contact with pet turtles. Of the 23 people who reported the size of the pet turtle, 21 (91%) 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 these outbreaks. 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 these outbreaks likely got sick from the same type of animal.

[WGS analysis](#) of bacteria from 49 people's samples did not predict resistance to any antibiotics. One isolate was predicted to be resistant to the following antibiotics: ampicillin, ceftiofur, ceftriaxone, ciprofloxacin, and trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole. More information is available at the [National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System \(NARMS\)](#) site. Most people with *Salmonella* illness recover without antibiotics. However, if antibiotics are needed, this resistance is unlikely to affect the choice of antibiotic used to treat most people.

In June 2024, samples were collected from a sick person's turtle in California for testing. This turtle was purchased from a street vendor. WGS performed by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Laboratory showed that *Salmonella* serotype Poona from the turtle was closely related to the bacteria from sick people.

In July 2024, samples were collected from one turtle and its environment in a sick person's home in Illinois for testing. The turtle was purchased from a souvenir shop. WGS performed by the Illinois Department of Public Health Laboratory showed the *Salmonella* Poona on the turtle and its environment were the same as the bacteria from the sick individual.

Eighteen people in both outbreaks reported purchasing or receiving these small turtles from a variety of locations:

- Street vendors, 5 (28%)
- Online retailers, 4 (22%)
- Souvenir shops, 4 (22%)

- Received as gift, 2 (11%)
- Swap meets, 1 (6%)
- Pet stores, 1 (6%)
- Social media, 1 (6%)

A common turtle supplier to these locations has not been identified.

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. A [federal law](#) bans the sale and distribution of these turtles as pets.