

*Aquarium animals such as reptiles and fish make great family pets, but they can sometimes spread disease to people.*

# Safe Handling of Fish and Reptiles

Last updated: 1 July 2012

## What is the danger with fish and reptile pets?

- Aquarium animals such as reptiles and fish can make great family pets, but it is important to remember that they can sometimes harbour germs (bacteria, viruses and parasites) that cause disease in humans.
- Bacteria from fish and reptile pets, such as *Salmonella*, can cause gastroenteritis after entering our digestive system.
- Other types of bacteria can enter the body through cuts and scratches on the skin, causing a skin infection that may spread to other parts of the body.

## What are the symptoms?

- Common symptoms of gastroenteritis include diarrhoea, fever, stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting and headache.
- Symptoms usually last 4-7 days, sometimes longer depending on the severity.

## How is it spread?

- Some aquarium pets carry *Salmonella* bacteria in their digestive system without making them ill. The bacteria are shed in their droppings, which can then contaminate the water and gravel in the aquarium.
- People may become infected after handling pets or the aquarium, or cleaning up after them and then not washing their hands and arms properly afterwards.

## Who is at risk?

Everyone can be infected. However, infants, the elderly and people with a weakened immune system are at greater risk of infection.

## How is it prevented?

- Always wash your hands (and your child's hands) thoroughly with soap and water after touching your pet, its food and its housing in the aquarium.
- Do not allow children to play in your pet's aquarium or with the gravel or water from an aquarium.
- Keep pets away from mouths and do not eat food while playing with your pet.
- If you have cuts, scratches, blisters or sores on your hands or arms, avoid direct handling of your pet, its food and its surroundings.
- Wear gloves or use nets instead of putting bare hands and arms into a fish aquarium or if you use bare hands and arms make sure you wash thoroughly afterwards.

- Discourage elderly people, sick people or anyone with a weakened immune system from directly handling your aquarium pets.
- Keep your pet, its food, food containers and aquarium out of the kitchen, or away from any food storage or preparation areas.
- Never clean the aquarium, or your pet's food containers in the kitchen sink or other areas where food is prepared or eaten. The laundry sink is a better place to do this.
- Do not dispose of aquarium water into your kitchen sink. Instead pour it down the laundry sink and clean the sink immediately.
- Check your pet for signs of illness, and seek advice from a vet if they become sick. Sick or dead animals may be infectious and should be handled, and disposed of, with extra care.

### **How is it diagnosed?**

If you or a family member becomes ill with severe gastroenteritis or an unusual skin infection, go to your doctor and remember to tell them about your contact with any tropical fish, or animals kept in an aquarium.

### **How is it treated?**

Follow the advice that is given to you by your doctor. For gastroenteritis, most people recover with rest and plenty of fluids.

### **What is the public health response?**

Your local public health unit can advise further regarding exclusions from work and school. Children in childcare should stay home until diarrhoea has stopped. People who are food handlers or who care for children, the sick or the elderly, should avoid work for 48 hours after the diarrhoea has stopped.

For further information please call your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055 or visit the New South Wales Health website [www.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au)