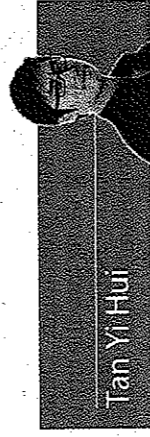


# Can my pets hurt me?

**Avoid animal-related infections such as salmonella by practising good pet-care hygiene**



Tan Yi Hui

**T**hey may look cute and harmless, but according to a recent report by a leading United States paediatricians' group, certain pets such as hamsters and chicks should not be kept in homes with young children because of risk of disease.

The American Academy of Paediatrics states that "non-traditional" pets that include lizards and turtles can carry germs and may be more prone than cats and dogs to bite, scratch or claw. Thus, they pose a threat to children younger than five years old, whose immune systems are still developing.

According to the group, 11 per cent of salmonella cases in children are thought to stem from contact with animals such as exotic reptiles and hamsters. Symptoms are severe diarrhoea, fever and stomach cramps.

But the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) does not see the need for any drastic action in response to the American findings. It says that pet-care hygiene should always be observed and that the main concern to

public health from animals here is rabies. Strict quarantine rules are in place for that.

It reminds pet owners, however, to always take proper precautions, especially with children around (see other story).

The AVA regulates the import of animal species into Singapore for sale in pet shops. While hamsters and terrapin species such as the red-eared slider are approved here, it says that other exotic animals such as snakes and lizards are prohibited, unlike in the US.

Dr Lim Poh Lian, an infectious disease specialist at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, says salmonella is carried by a variety of species from birds to mammals, and is not exclusive to hamsters or exotic reptiles.

She also advises parents to watch out for other scenarios where children come into contact with animals, such as on school trips to farms and zoos where they get to pet small animals.

But she adds that salmonella infections acquired by children from animals are "potentially preventable" if parents and teachers make the effort to ensure the kids observe proper hygiene.

Experts from the Singapore Veterinary Association also point out that it is crucial for pet owners to take their pets for regular check-ups to protect both parties from such diseases.

People in the pet industry here also see no cause for alarm.

Ms Deirdre Moss, executive officer of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, says it all boils down to basic hygiene. She adds: "You can't expect children to automatically know

that they have to wash their hands after playing with animals. This is where parents play an important role in supervising."

But on a more cautionary note, Dr Anita Menon, an infectious disease expert at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, says the 11 per cent figure of animal-transmitted salmonella cases in children quoted in the US report may be "an under-representation of the actual number as there are unreported cases as well."

According to her, KK has also encountered cases of children with diseases such as E. Coli, bacterial infection and ringworms from contact with animals, although no figures are available. She adds: "Parents should definitely reconsider when buying pets and take into account the age and health status of their children. They should do some research before buying."

Some pet owners though, are not worried. Mr Lawrence Oliveira's household is a family of animal lovers.

He has two twin daughters, aged 21, and two sons, 16 and six. They have a dog, a cat, canaries, fish and hamsters.

The 47-year-old army regular says he allows his kids to only feed and play with the hamsters in their cage and always makes sure they wash their hands after doing so.

His philosophy: "I think it's generally safe as long as there is proper hygiene. If kids can learn to care for animals, you can see they will mature and learn to care for people."

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## Take good care of your pets

■ Consider whether your family has the time to care for a pet. This might even apply to smaller, seemingly low-maintenance animals such as terrapins because they have a long lifespan and require frequent tank-water changes to maintain hygiene.

■ Match the size and temperament of a pet with the age and behaviour of your children. For example, if you have a very young child, a large or active dog could put your child at risk of getting bitten or scratched.

■ Take note of proper pet-health maintenance including immunisations, flea and tick control, de-worming, diet and activity. This is especially so when adopting stray animals.

■ Educate children on the importance of washing their hands with soap and water after touching animals or handling anything pet-related from pet food to cages. Make sure no food meant for humans comes into contact with pets.

■ Young children should be supervised closely when in contact with animals and any bites or scratches should be attended to promptly.

■ Children should be taught not to rub their eyes or put their fingers into their mouths after touching a pet.

■ Items that end up in the mouths of infants or young children should not be in areas of animal contact. These items include pacifiers, infant bottles and cups.

■ It is not advisable to let your pet onto the bed. Young children, the elderly and those with a weak immune system should take precautions and minimise contact with pets or any animal discharge.

■ Before you buy a pet, look out for proper import permits accompanied by health certificates, as required by AVA.

■ Owners who take their dogs for walks should avoid grassy areas frequented by other dogs so that their pets do not pick up ticks. They should also not allow their dogs to ingest foreign objects in public places.

Source: [PetsChannel.com](http://PetsChannel.com), AVA, TTSH, KKH, Singapore Veterinary Association

