

Warning on salmonella risk from reptile handling

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Credit: Flinders University

Is there a salmonella infection risk for humans who come into contact with pet lizards and snakes?

While reported cases related to lizards and snakes are relatively few, Flinders University environmental health experts warn that the link may be overlooked and therefore not investigated.

Importantly, they warn the infections linked to lizards or snakes and other squamates tends to be more severe than food-borne salmonellosis.

This put children under five at most risk, with several fatalities reported in children aged less than six months, say Dr Harriet Whiley and Dr Kirstin Ross from Flinders University.

"In many published cases, it was noted that the patient was unaware of the risks associated with keeping pet lizards and snakes and did not practise proper hand hygiene after handling the animals or cleaning cages," says Dr Whiley.

The researchers, including Flinders University reptile scientist Associate Professor Mike Gardner, say the research has followed an increase in human interaction with squamates, particularly lizards and snakes, in many countries around the world.

"In several cases there was no report of the infected child coming into direct contact with the [snake](#) or lizard which supports the theory that improper [hand hygiene](#) may have allowed the salmonella to spread from the lizard or snake cage to humans," Dr Whiley says.



Associate Professor Mike Bull and Dr Harriet Whiley at the animal nursery at Flinders University.

People who handle captive or wild snakes or lizards should thoroughly wash their hands with hot, soapy water.

Preschool children and older people with weakened immune systems should avoid contact with snakes and lizards.

Pet snakes and lizards should also not be allowed to roam through a house or living area, and should be kept out of kitchens to prevent contamination.

Material in vacuum cleaners was also identified as a source of salmonella from lizards and snakes.

"No one knows what role wild [lizards](#) play in human salmonellosis and although studies have demonstrated wild lizard carry the bacteria there is limited information demonstrating the potential for this to spread to humans," Dr Whiley says.

"A review of the literature available highlights the need for more education to inform the public on ways to reduce the risk of salmonellosis from pet squamates.

"And further research is needed investigate the role of wild squamates in the spread of human salmonellosis, both directly and indirectly through cross-contamination."

More information: Harriet Whiley et al. A Review of Salmonella and Squamates (Lizards, Snakes and Amphisbians): Implications for Public Health, *Pathogens* (2017). [DOI: 10.3390/pathogens6030038](https://doi.org/10.3390/pathogens6030038)

Provided by Flinders University

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