

# Can I get sick from my pet?

March 22 2024, by Ernie Mundell

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Cuddly, friendly, fun: Your pet brings so much to your life, but experts warn that, in rare cases, they can also bring illness.

The health benefits of pet ownership are many, noted Dr. Stacey Rose, an associate professor of infectious diseases and internal medicine at

Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

For example, the presence of a dog or cat in the home can desensitize a child's developing [immune system](#) to certain allergens. Pets are also well-known stress busters, helping to lower risks for [high blood pressure](#) and depression, Rose noted in a Baylor news release.

But there are hidden health dangers, especially for [pregnant women](#) or anyone with an immune system weakened by illness, organ transplant or infection with HIV.

For those people, there's the risk of toxoplasmosis, caused by the toxoplasma germ that can be found in cat feces, Rose said.

Hookworm—this time found in dog feces—is another infectious agent to be wary of, so always wash your hands after picking up after your dog.

Then there's the danger of getting bitten or scratched by a dog, cat or other pet.

Cats, especially, can transmit a dangerous organism called *Pasteurella multocida* through a bite, and dog bites can pass along another hazardous germ called *Capnocytophaga canimorsus*.

Infections with these germs can be dangerous and even fatal for people with compromised immune systems, Rose said.

Cats and dogs who roam outside can also come into contact with rodents, possums, raccoons and other wild critters. Rose said the main health issue there is the insects that live on these animals, such as fleas and ticks—and the illnesses they carry.

For example, Murine typhus is a flea-borne illness that can bring on rash, fever and other symptoms in humans.

"You don't have to have direct exposure with a rodent to be at risk; if your pets are gallivanting with those other animals and the fleas are transferred from the rodent to your pet, then your pet can help transmit that disease," Rose explained.

*Bartonella henselae* illness is another flea-borne bacterium that's so associated with felines that it's been nicknamed "cat scratch" disease.

It's most associated with scratches from kittens, Rose said. If the kitten is carrying fleas, the fleas' infected feces can enter your body via a scratch.

According to the Baylor news release, "In kids or adults with a normal immune system, one might develop a big lymph node that will go away on its own," after a scratch, but "with a compromised immune system, that same bug can lead to far-reaching diseases including bloodstream infections or infections of the heart or heart valves, or the eye, liver or spleen."

Then there are illnesses caught from scaly cold-blooded pets such as turtles, lizards or snakes.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continues to issue alerts about people (often small children) catching salmonella from these animals after handling them.

Elderly people, or those with compromised immune systems, should also avoid handling pet reptiles, or wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water if they do.

"There are plenty of reasons why we can and should have pets, but you just need [to] be aware of your own immune system and the potential risks," Rose said. "Taking good care of your pets also matters, like keeping their environment clean and using flea prevention. We have to be conscientious pet owners for our own health and the health of our families and neighbors."

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