

HerpVet Services
Dedicated veterinary service for exotic pets



HerpVet Information Services

C/o Iffley Vets
35 Iffley Road
Oxford OX4 1EA

www.herpvet.co.uk
email: herpvet@herpvet.co.uk

HerpVet Information Services Publication IS01

Bugs your pet can give you - hygiene Considerations when keeping reptiles and amphibians

This information sheet is designed to put the potential disease (not biting/clawing etc!) threats to your health from pet reptiles into perspective, and outline some sensible precautions for handling and dealing with your pets. I must point out that this is a basic information sheet, and that it therefore contains some simplifications/generalisations.

A major point that must be borne in mind is that, like all animals, reptiles normally carry a variety of organisms in their bodies (mainly in the guts) which can potentially cause health problems in humans. The most hyped one is *Salmonella* bacteria, but there are other potential risks. Fortunately, with sensible hygiene precautions the risk of problems is minimal.

However, the individuals who are potentially exposed must also be considered; people with relatively poor immune systems, such as very young children, the elderly, HIV/AIDS or chemotherapy patients, are more at risk. Having said that, with proper hygiene precautions the risk is generally very small in most cases – probably considerably less than the risk of being run over in most cases.

The threats

Although in theory reptile-borne bacteria, fungi, protozoa, worms, viruses, ticks and mites could all be potential problems, in practice the only significant threat (in the U.K at least) comes from bacteria and, less likely, worms. For our purposes, I will refer to them simply as bugs.

It should be pointed out here that disease is rarely a case of one bug = disease in all patients under all circumstances. There will be an interaction between the potentially nasty bug (how nasty it is, and how much of it there is – hence the importance of hygiene) and the host's defences (immune system, physical barriers such as skin). Only if the bug comes out on top (which will be favoured by lots of the bug and/or weakness of the defences) does disease occur. The potential of any particular bug will vary – some will normally be rapidly fatal to even healthy adults. Conversely, some bugs, particularly many fungi, will only cause problems if the defences of the

body are severely weakened, either generally (e.g. by stress) or locally (e.g. a wound, where the skin is damaged and its defences reduced).

There are also many potential theoretical methods of transmission, including airborne, direct contact, contact with products (faeces/urine/shed skin – and by extension anything such as a vivarium or vivarium furnishings that comes into contact with them) and biting insects. As a general rule, the only significant routes are likely to be direct contact or contact with products. The basic hygiene is therefore aimed at minimising the risks of contact with the reptiles or their products.

The precautions

It should first be noted that the following precautions are theoretical advice based on what is reasonable for adequate protection. As with anything in life, how much risk you accept is up to you – you can try to minimise your risk but in most cases you will never eliminate it, and a reasonable compromise is necessary. You could, for example, wear a disposable suit, mask and gloves when handling reptiles, but for most pet reptiles they are not practical or necessary.

The following list consists of things to do or not do in terms of hygiene – as you will see, it is mainly common sense, and can (and should) be applied to any pet animal.

- Wash your hands thoroughly after handling any reptile, or its cage or accessories.
- Keep your reptile's housing clean (to reduce bug build-up), including frequent disinfection (suitable disinfectants can be obtained from reptile shops, a chemist or your vet – consult your vet for up-to-date details of suitable ones). A balance has to be struck with excessive disturbance of the pet however.
- Cover any open wounds when handling reptiles (and handle them properly so that they don't inflict any wounds on you!).
- Do not wash reptile cage furnishings (including food and water bowls) in the household sinks, or at least do so carefully – remember that splashes could carry bugs.
- Do not eat, drink or smoke while handling reptiles, and do not let reptiles have access to any eating or food preparation areas.
- Do not let reptiles have access to any areas where high-risk people (see above) might be exposed, particularly if they cannot be disinfected
- Disinfect any areas where reptiles have been (e.g. baths, etc); note that this means they should not really be allowed anywhere that cannot be adequately cleaned and disinfected (such as free in a room).
- Closely monitor any children handling reptiles and make sure they follow the hygiene precautions.