

## **HerpVet Information Services**

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## **HerpVet Information Services Publication IS01**

### **Hygiene Considerations when keeping reptiles**

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; clearly, 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 even for these 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, more marginally, 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 and the host's immune system, and only if the bug comes out on top (which will be favoured by high concentrations of the bug and/or weakness of the immune system) does disease occur. The potential of any particular bug will vary – some will normally be rapidly fatal to even healthy adults (such as the rabies virus, for example – although even here boosting the immune system by vaccination can usually stop it). Conversely, some bugs, particularly fungi, will only cause problems if the immune 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, your level of protection is up to you – you can try to minimise or maximise your risk but in most cases you will never eliminate it, and a reasonable compromise is necessary. You could take more precautions than those noted here (for example, wearing a disposable suit, mask and gloves when handling reptiles) but for most pet reptiles they are not practical or necessary. Conversely, many people allow their reptiles to roam around their house or garden; this is not theoretically advisable, but in most cases it will cause no problem.

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).
- 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 – remember that splashes could carry bugs.
- 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.
- Disinfect any areas where reptiles have been (e.g. baths, etc); note that this means they should not in theory be allowed anywhere that cannot be adequately cleaned and disinfected (such as free in a room).
- Do not eat, drink or smoke while handling reptiles.
- Closely monitor any children handling reptiles and make sure they follow the hygiene precautions.