



# Maricopa County

## News Release

**Environmental Services  
Department**  
1001 N. Central Avenue  
Suite 200  
Phoenix, AZ 85004  
Phone: 602-506-6611  
Fax: 602-506-1874  
[www.maricopa.gov/envsvc](http://www.maricopa.gov/envsvc)

For additional information: Johnny Diloné, Environmental Services Public Information Officer  
Office: 602-506-6611 Cell: 602-525-2423  
Megan Collins, Public Health, Public Information  
Office : 602-506-6607

## Maricopa County Warns Consumers of Salmonella Risk in Pet Turtles

PHOENIX (August 29, 2007) - Concerned over the 11 reports of salmonellosis in children under 8 years old since January in Maricopa County, Maricopa County Departments of Public Health and Environmental Services are urgently reminding the public that contact with small turtles can pose a serious health risk to infants, small children, and adults with impaired immune systems.

These turtles can be natural hosts to *Salmonella*, a group of bacteria that can cause severe illness and death.

"Recently we have seen more street vendors selling these small turtles," said John Power, director of Maricopa County Environmental Services. "We are doing our best to crack down on these vendors, but we are asking the public to help us by not buying these illegal turtles and reporting to us any incidences of these turtles."

*Salmonella* is the genus name of a number of bacteria commonly associated with food poisoning from contaminated or undercooked foods, and salmonellosis is the disease the bacteria can cause. *Salmonella* can be found on the outer skin and shell surfaces of the turtles causing salmonellosis for those handling turtles without properly washing their hands after handling the animals.

Maricopa County is reminding parents and others who care for children of the following:

- The sale, distribution, or gifting of turtles with a shell less than four inches long is illegal. Exceptions to the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) regulation include sale or distribution of these turtles intended for export only or for bona fide scientific, educational, or exhibition purpose, if not associated with a business;
- *Salmonella* infection can be caused by contact with turtles in petting zoos, parks, child day care facilities and other locations; and
- It is important to wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after handling or touching turtles or reptiles, their cages, or food bowls.
- Reptiles and their cages/aquariums should not be washed in the kitchen sink or bathtub.
- Reptiles should not be allowed in food preparation or eating areas.
- Reptiles should not be allowed to crawl in areas where children play and should not be kept in child care facilities.

Fulton Brock, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, says, "It is important that all of us, especially children, are aware of the potential danger in handling these harmless looking pet turtles. Washing your hands after handling them is advisable."

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In the early 1970's, it was determined that pet turtles, particularly red-eared sliders, were responsible for an estimated 280,000 cases of salmonellosis each year in the United States. In 1975, FDA banned the sale of turtles with a shell less than four inches long as a necessary public health measure. FDA has repeatedly emphasized the risks of turtle-associated salmonellosis because of resurgence in the sales of such turtles in the last four years. The public health impact of turtle-associated salmonellosis in humans is an estimated 74,000 cases in the United States per year.

*Salmonella* infection can be transmitted either directly from contact with the turtle or its feces, or indirectly through the animal's water. Turtles with *Salmonella* usually do not appear to be sick. Their feces do not always contain the bacteria therefore a single negative test does not prove they are *Salmonella*-free.

Although anyone can acquire a salmonellosis infection, the risk is highest in infants, young children, the elderly, and others with lowered natural resistance to disease. Pregnancy, cancer, chemotherapy, organ transplant, diabetes, and liver problems pose particular risks. Gastrointestinal symptoms following *Salmonella* exposure begin in 6 to 72 hours (usually 12 to 36 hours) and generally last for two to seven days.

For more information on FDA's regulation of turtles, please visit <http://www.fda.gov/cvm/turtleregs.htm>. To report illegal turtle vendors, please call the Environmental Complaint Line at 602-506-6616 or [www.maricopa.gov/envsvc](http://www.maricopa.gov/envsvc). If you have questions related to a pet turtle, please call your veterinarian. For more information or assistance you may also contact Phoenix Herpetological Society at 602-550-7029, website: [http://www.phoenixherp.com/content/index.php?option=com\\_frontpage&Itemid=1](http://www.phoenixherp.com/content/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1) .

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