



Healthy pets, healthy people: How to avoid the diseases that pets can spread to people

Pets are good for people. They provide joy, can help improve our health, and help teach children values and social skills. But some pets can carry diseases or may be dangerous for young children.

- Reptiles, such as turtles, lizards and snakes, often carry salmonella, a kind of bacteria (germ) that can be very hard to kill. Even if a young child does not touch the pet, he or she may become infected with the germ.
- Exotic animals, such as sugar gliders, hedgehogs or monkeys, are not good pets for children. They can be dangerous, or they may need special care that young children cannot provide.
- Most dogs may bite from time to time, but some dogs are bred and raised to be aggressive. These dogs, such as rottweilers, German shepherds and pitbulls, should not be kept in homes with small children.
- Wild animals should not be kept as pets.
- Ferrets are not suitable pets for households with infants or small children.

What are zoonoses?

Zoonoses are diseases that people can get from animals, especially when you have close contact with them.

Like people, all animals carry germs. In Canada, your chances of getting a disease from an animal are small. But it's still a good idea to know what to look for in your pet and how to avoid getting sick from an animal.

When my dog sneezes will I catch a cold?

We don't catch colds or the 'flu from most pets. There are very few diseases we can get from pets. Here are some diseases that *don't* normally spread from pets to people:

- cat leukemia;
- cat immunodeficiency (sometimes called feline AIDS);
- distemper;
- hantavirus;
- heartworms;
- hookworms (animal);
- parvovirus;
- pinworms;
- systemic fungal infections;
- Lyme disease; and
- 'flu, colds, sore throats.



How can we prevent diseases from spreading from pets to people?

Several factors affect whether diseases will spread from animals to humans.

The climate and living conditions: Many of the parasites and bugs that spread disease can't live in the Canadian climate. And because our population is fairly spread out, it is harder for diseases to get around.

Pet health care: The best way to avoid catching a disease from your pet is to make sure your pet is healthy. You can do this by:

- getting your pet from a source you trust (talk to a veterinarian [vet] for suggestions);
- making sure your pet sees the vet regularly and has all necessary vaccinations; and
- keeping close watch on your pet's contact with other animals that might carry disease.

Your health: People with a weak immune system have more chance of developing serious problems from zoonoses, and should be extra careful around pets. But remember that pets can be wonderful companions for people who are sick. To find the best pet and keep it healthy, talk to your doctor and vet.

Handwashing: Make sure you and your children always wash your hands after handling pets. Clean up carefully after your pets.

What about bites and scratches?

- Most diseases spread from pets to people through biting, scratching or direct contact. The first step in preventing injuries is to train your dog or cat not to bite.
- When a pet scratches you, clean it right away. You probably won't need more treatment if your immune system is working normally.
- Cat bites are usually thin and deep and may not look very serious. But germs from the cat's mouth can get into your skin and cause infection. You may need antibiotics.
- Dog bites may look worse, but they're usually less serious. Dog bites don't need antibiotics as often.
- If you are bitten, clean the wound right away with soap and water, and ask your doctor about the risk of infection.
- If a bite breaks the skin, call your local public health unit if:
 - the animal is not yours;
 - the bite is on the head or neck;
 - the wound is serious;
 - you didn't do anything that might cause the animal to bite you;
 - the animal is not acting normally; or
 - the animal seems sick.
- If an animal bites for no obvious reason, it may be a sign that it has rabies. Rabies is not common, but if it occurs it is always fatal. That's why health officials will make sure that the biting incident is investigated, the animal is examined and the person bitten is given preventive treatment if needed. The bite will be treated by a doctor, and public health officials should be called.

A NOTE FROM THE DOCTOR: ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



- You should talk to a doctor or someone from your local public health office if:
 - you or your child is bitten by a wild or farm animal; or
 - you or your child has contact with a bat, or you think your child has had contact with a bat.

Germs can also spread from animals if people come in contact with urine, feces or sores on the pet. They can also be spread through the air by coughs and sneezes, although this is less common. The next section describes those types of infections.

Some (but not all) diseases that can spread from animals to people

Disease	Which pets can get this disease?	How does it get from pets to people?	What happens if I get it?	Tips for prevention
<p>TOXOPLASMOSIS – An infection caused by a single-cell parasite.</p>	<p>Most pet species can carry this disease, but only cats shed the germs that cause infection.</p> <p>Cats get it by eating rodents, raw meat, cockroaches, flies or by being in contact with infected cats, infected cat feces or contaminated soil.</p>	<p>It is rare for people to get this disease from cats. But pregnant women and anyone with reduced immunity should be careful.</p> <p>Toxoplasmosis can be transmitted to humans by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not washing your hands or your children’s hands after gardening, playing in the sandbox or cleaning out the cat’s litter box; or • eating unwashed fruits and vegetables grown in soil contaminated by pets <p>Note that many infections do not come from pets, eg, undercooked meats</p>	<p>If you are healthy, the symptoms may be fever, feeling generally unwell or swollen lymph nodes.</p> <p>If you are pregnant and if it is your first exposure, the infection can cause birth defects, miscarriage or even death of the baby.</p> <p>If you have a weakened immune system, toxoplasmosis can lead to potentially life-threatening brain infections.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice careful hygiene around litter boxes. Wear gloves while cleaning up and wash hands afterward. • If you are pregnant, don’t handle cat litter – let someone else clean the litter box. If this is not possible, make sure the litter box is cleaned at least daily. • Keep children’s sandboxes covered. • Keep your cat from hunting. • Cook meats well, wash your hands after handling raw meats and wash vegetables. • Wear gloves while gardening and wash hands afterwards.
<p>ROUNDWORMS (Toxocaral Larva Migrans) – Many species of worms, often in the intestines; rarely, animal hookworms may also cause larva migrans.</p>	<p>Dogs are the most likely to become infected.</p>	<p>People can get roundworms from the fecal matter of dogs. Most often, these are young children who eat dirt or sand that contain roundworm eggs because of dog stool left on the soil.</p>	<p>Roundworm eggs can hatch in a person’s stomach. Roundworms can travel around the body and cause damage to the eyes, leading to blindness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure puppies are dewormed. • Always clean up your dog’s stool. • Make sure young children don’t eat dirt. • Keep sandboxes covered.

continued on next page

A NOTE FROM THE DOCTOR: ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



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PSITTACOSIS (Parrot Fever) – A bacteria-like organism that causes pneumonia.	Pet birds and wild birds can carry and spread psittacosis.	People catch psittacosis from contact with infected bird droppings, when the birds sneeze, or dust from their cages gets into the air.	Although usually mild or moderate, human disease can be serious, especially if older people get it and it is not treated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't expose your pet bird to other birds. • Keep the cage clean and wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after handling the bird and the cage. • Buy birds only from reliable sources.
HANTAVIRUS – A common virus in deer mice that sometimes attacks the lungs of people.	Hantavirus spreads through the air. Humans can get it by sweeping up deer mouse droppings. A dog or cat cannot spread hantavirus from a rodent to a person.	<p>Hantavirus is carried by deer mice. Field mice and other rodents may occasionally be infected but probably don't spread disease. Deer mice are common in rural areas; field mice are usually found in the city. Because it is often difficult to be certain which is which, you should treat all mice and mouse droppings as if they might be infected.</p> <p>Dogs and cats can get hantavirus but do not spread it to humans.</p>	<p>This infection usually starts with 'flu-like symptoms such as headache, muscle pain and fever. Shortness of breath and other serious symptoms develop next, and it can cause death. Most cases of hantavirus have been reported in Alberta and British Columbia, but rodents who can carry the virus are found everywhere in Canada. No cases have been reported in children under 12 years of age, but we do not know if they can occur.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take precautions when cleaning up mouse droppings. • Soak mouse droppings with disinfectant. • Wear gloves and a protective facemask if you are likely to be exposed to lots of droppings or in spaces with little ventilation. • Pick up the mouse droppings without sweeping or vacuuming. • Never live trap wild mice and do not keep them as pets. • If shortness of breath develops, see a doctor immediately.
RABIES – A virus that attacks the brain.	In Canada, rabies is found most often in foxes, skunks, bats and raccoons. Pets can get rabies if these animals bite them.	Rabies passes to humans through the bite of an infected wild animal or house pet. In Canada, house pets almost never have rabies, but bites from animals acting strangely, stray animals or those that live outside must be investigated.	Immunization can be given after a bite, and a doctor should decide this. Once symptoms have developed, death almost always occurs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The best protection is to vaccinate all pets and avoid handling wild animals. • See your doctor about all bites, especially those that are not clearly provoked or where the animal is acting strangely. • Report all strange incidents and suspicious animals to public health officials.

continued on next page

A NOTE FROM THE DOCTOR: ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



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<p>CAT SCRATCH DISEASE (Bartonellosis) – A bacterial infection that causes skin infections.</p>	<p>Cats, particularly kittens, carry the germs under their claws. The cats likely get their infection from fleas.</p>	<p>Because their claws are thin and sharp, cat scratches inject bacteria under the skin. The disease can also be spread if an infected cat licks an open cut, sore or wound.</p>	<p>If scratch wounds are not cleaned properly, the skin can become infected. In rare cases, it can be more serious.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach your cat not to scratch and your children not to play roughly with pets. • Clean scratched skin thoroughly with soap and water. • See your doctor if the skin becomes red and inflamed or if you develop swollen glands.
<p>SALMONELLA – A bacteria that causes intestinal infections. It is a common cause of food poisoning.</p>	<p>Reptiles such as turtles, iguanas and snakes often carry salmonella which cannot be treated. Dogs and cats can catch salmonella and can spread the germs to people. Chicken, turkeys and other birds can also carry salmonella. Food, such as eggs, is a common source of infection for people.</p>	<p>Pets that carry salmonella usually don't get sick from it, but people do. People get it from direct contact with their pets, or from cages, living areas or bird feeders contaminated by salmonella. Certain pet treats, such as pigs' ear chews, may be contaminated as well and can infect humans.</p>	<p>Salmonella can cause severe diarrhea and vomiting. In very young children and older people, it can cause death.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean your pet's cage and living area thoroughly. • Wash your hands well with soap and water after handling pets and pet chews. • Keep reptile pets away from young children and babies. • Exotic pets, such as sugar gliders and hedgehogs, turtles and other reptiles should not be kept as pets in homes with young children.
<p>CAMPYLOBACTER – A bacteria that causes intestinal infections.</p>	<p>Many animals can carry campylobacter and some, particularly puppies, may develop diarrhea.</p>	<p>People get campylobacter from contact with infected animals when they do not wash their hands thoroughly after contact.</p>	<p>Campylobacter causes diarrhea that can be bloody and sometimes a high fever. People with this infection can become very sick.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach children to always wash their hands after contact with pets. • Puppies with diarrhea should be seen by a vet for proper treatment.

continued on next page

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KENNEL COUGH (Bordetella; also known as canine cough) – An infectious disease that causes infection and inflammation of the windpipe.	It's easy for dogs to catch canine cough from other dogs. Cats rarely catch it.	Canine cough can spread to people, but this is uncommon. Whooping cough is caused by a germ with the same name, but people do not get whooping cough from pets.	Humans symptoms are like those of a cold or bronchitis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The best prevention is to vaccinate your dog and keeping it away from places where there are lots of dogs in a small space. • Canine cough can be treated with antibiotics.
GIARDIA and CRYPTOSPORIDIUM – Parasites called protozoa that cause intestinal disease.	Dogs and other pets can be infected with these parasites, sometimes without having any symptoms.	People, particularly children, are at risk of getting infected if they do not properly wash their hands after contact with their pet.	Diarrhea is the most common symptom. There may also be severe stomach cramps. These infections can be severe if you have immune system problems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach children to always wash their hands after contact with pets. • Pets with diarrhea should be seen by a vet for proper treatment.
RINGWORM – A fungus that causes a skin rash.	Cats are the most common carriers. Ringworm prefers high humidity, so it's not common in many provinces.	Ringworm is transmitted by direct contact with fungal spores. Pets may carry spores without any sign of disease.	Ringworm causes an itchy rash to develop on the skin.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In most cases, the rash will eventually go away by itself. Creams can help speed recovery.

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