

Happy and Healthy:

Your pocket pets and you

There are many health benefits to pets but any animal can also carry germs that can make people sick. Luckily, there are simple things you can do to keep you and your family healthy.

Pocket pets, like all other animals and humans, can carry germs in their digestive system (which includes everything from the mouth to the stomach to the intestines) and then pass those germs in their feces (droppings).

Germs, such as the bacteria *Salmonella*, may be present in the droppings of pocket pets even if the animals appear to be healthy. If these germs are accidentally eaten, when a person touches the droppings (or the animal) and later touches his or her mouth, or prepares food without washing his or her hands first, the person may become ill.

Symptoms of infection in people include diarrhea, fever, vomiting and abdominal cramps. Children are especially at risk for becoming infected because they are more likely to put their hands in their mouths after handling a pet. Anyone can become ill from these germs, but young children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems may develop more serious illness.

What other germs can be spread by pocket pets?

Another germ that certain kinds of pocket pets can carry is a virus called **lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus** or LCMV. This virus is carried by wild mice, which can then infect people or pet rodents. Saliva, urine, droppings or soiled bedding from infected rodents may be contaminated with the virus and can be a source of infection in people. As with *Salmonella*, animals infected with LCMV may look healthy, so it is difficult to tell if an animal is carrying the virus just by looking at it.

Most people who become infected with LCMV will not become sick or will develop mild flu-like symptoms. However, people with weakened immune systems can have more severe illness. In addition, infection during pregnancy may lead to health problems with the developing baby, although it is not known how often this happens.

To be safe, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems should not bring a new pet rodent into their household and should limit their contact with pet rodents they already have.

See page 2 for safe handling instructions

Here are a few simple things that can make having a pocket pet safe and fun:

- **Always wash your hands with soap and water immediately after handling pets, their cage, food dishes or toys, or their droppings;** use waterless, alcohol-based gels or hand rubs if soap is not available.
- Clean cages regularly and remove soiled items from the cage between cleanings.
- Always clean the cage outside or in a well-ventilated area. Do not clean it in the kitchen sink or anywhere else food is stored or handled.
- Closely supervise young children, especially those less than five years old, when cleaning cages, and make sure they wash their hands immediately after handling pets or pet cages.
- Do not kiss pocket pets or hold them close to your face.
- Have your pet seen regularly by your veterinarian and contact your veterinarian if your pet shows signs of illness between visits.
- Because pregnant women, persons with weakened immune systems, the elderly and young children (those less than 5 years old) are at higher risk for more serious illness, birds should be not be handled and cared for by an individual who falls in one of these categories.
- Do not allow pets to come into contact with wild animals, their droppings or nests.

For more information about handling pets safely, see:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, “Healthy Pets Healthy people” at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/index.htm>.
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph/epi> or call the Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617-983-6800 or toll free at 1-888-658-2850.
- Or call your veterinarian.