



Role of Pets in Human Disease

Pets make wonderful companions, and help keep us healthy and active.

Animals, like people, interact with the world around them. Like us, they can become infected with bacteria, parasites and viruses from spoiled food, other infected animals, or the environment.

Some of the disease from pets and their feces, urine and saliva can infect humans. Disease does not happen very often and is usually mild. However, severe disease is possible. Infections that can be spread from animals to humans include: *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *Giardia*, *Cryptosporidium*, *Yersinia*, *Toxoplasma*, rabies, *Bartonella*, psittacosis, round worms and tape worms.

People at risk of serious problems from some of these infections include pregnant women, young children, the elderly, and those who have weakened immune systems from HIV/AIDS, cancer treatment, steroid therapy or organ or bone marrow transplant.

How can I prevent infections?

Your personal hygiene and health:

- **Wash your hands** after handling or cleaning up after your pet, its feces, toys, treats or food. Wash your hands before preparing food, eating or smoking.
- Many children have been infected by handling pets and then putting their fingers in their mouths before washing their hands. Parents, caregivers and teachers should make sure that children wash their hands right away after handling animals.
- Avoid any direct skin contact with your pet's feces, vomit, urine or saliva.
- Dishes and utensils are only for people. Pet food dishes are only for pets.
- Do not let your pet lick your child's face or your face.

- People whose immune systems are weakened should not keep a reptile or parrot-like bird because they often carry serious diseases.

Your pet's hygiene and health:

- All new pets should be examined by your veterinarian who may run some tests to screen for disease. Puppies and kittens are more likely to be infected with harmful bacteria and parasites, especially if they have diarrhea or were strays.
 - Keep your pet clean and well-groomed. Trim its nails often.
 - Keep your pet's living and feeding area clean.
 - Control parasites such as roundworms, tapeworms and fleas, which can be inside and outside your pet's body.
 - Take your pet to the veterinarian for a yearly checkup and keep your pet's vaccinations up to date.
 - Contact your veterinarian right away if your pet becomes less active or shows signs of illness such as loss of appetite, a cough that does not go away, sneezing, weight loss or diarrhea.
 - Outdoor cats can become infected with *Toxoplasma* from eating infected birds or rodents. If you have an outdoor cat, place a double bell on the collar to help warn prey. Indoor cats fed store-bought pet food are not at risk for *Toxoplasma* infections. If your cat hunts birds or rodents, your veterinarian can test it to see if it has been infected with *Toxoplasma*.
 - Turtles, reptiles (including snakes and iguanas), fish, and chicks are often infected with *Salmonella*.
- #### Animal bites:
- Animal bites and scratches are sources of infection because the mouths and feet of all animals can be contaminated. For example, cat bites or scratches can cause *Bartonella* infection (Cat Scratch Disease).

- Dog bites occur more than any other animal bite and most often in the summer months. Minor animal bites can usually be treated at home.
- Clean any bite or scratch with warm water and soap right after injury. See your doctor if a bite is deep, becomes infected, or your tetanus vaccination is not up to date.

Your pet's diet:

- Feed your pet high-quality pet foods.
- Do not feed your pet raw meat, raw meat pet treats or unpasteurized milk. Because they are raw, these products can contain germs that can make you or your pet sick. You can become infected if you do not wash your hands after handling these products or after touching your pet, which can be infected after eating the product.
- Do not let your pet eat its own or other animals' feces.
- Do not let your pet drink from the toilet bowl.
- Do not allow your pet access to the garbage.
- Do not let your pet eat other animals.

Bird cages:

- When cleaning a bird's cage, avoid disturbing its droppings if possible. The droppings may contain bacteria that can be inhaled and cause a disease called psittacosis. The symptoms of psittacosis include fever, headache, rash, muscle aches and cough.

Litter boxes:

People can become infected with *Toxoplasma* by swallowing the parasite after contact with an infected cat's feces. Toxoplasmosis in pregnant women can cause serious problems for the unborn baby such as brain damage or death.

Safe handling and storage of litter:

- Keep the litter box away from the kitchen and eating areas.
- Remove feces from the litter box daily. Pregnant women should get someone else to do this. If no one is available, wear rubber gloves and wash your hands afterwards.
- Do not dump the litter! If inhaled or ingested, the dust could infect you. Instead, line the box

with a plastic liner that will act as a bag for the litter when you dispose of it. Change the liner each time you change the litter.

- Disinfect the litter box once a month by wiping it out, filling it with boiling water and letting it stand for five minutes. No other disinfection method kills *Toxoplasma*.
- Wash your hands after cleaning the litter box.
- Cats may use your garden or sand box instead of the litter box so put a cover on the sand box to keep them out. Wear gloves and wash your hands after gardening or playing in the sand box.

For more information see the following HealthLink BC Files:

[#07 Rabies](#)

[#10 Giardia Infection](#)

[#17 Salmonellosis](#)

[#43 Toxoplasmosis](#)

[#48 Cryptosporidiosis](#)

[#58 Campylobacter Infection](#)

[#61b Petting Zoo and Open Farm Visits](#)

[#77 Yersiniosis](#)

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